THE SPLENDID FOLLY

MARGARET PEDLER

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THE SPLENDID FOLLY

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BY

MARGARET PEDLER

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THE HERMIT OF FAR END, ETC.

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TO MY HUSBAND

W. G. Q. PEDLER

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THE SPLENDID FOLLY

THE HAVEN OF MEMORY

Do you remember
Our great love's pure unfolding,
The troth you gave,
And prayed for God's upholding,
Long and long ago?

Out of the past
A dream—and then the waking—
Comes back to me,
Of love and love's forsaking,
Ere the summer waned.

Ah! Let me dream
That still a little kindness
Dwelt in the smile
That chid my foolish blindness,
When you said good-bye.

Let me remember,
When I am very lonely,
How once your love
But crowned and blessed me only,
Long and long ago!

MARGARET PEDLER.

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THE SPLENDID FOLLY

CHAPTER I

THE VERDICT

THE March wind swirled boisterously down Grellingham Place, catching up particles of grit and scraps of paper on his way and making them a torment to the passers-by, just as though the latter were not already amply occupied in trying to keep their hats on their heads.

But the blustering fellow cared nothing at all about that as he drove rudely against them, slapping their faces and blinding their eyes with eddies of dust; on the contrary, after he had swept forwards like a tornado for a matter of fifty yards or so he paused, as if in search of some fresh devilment, and espied a girl beating her way up the street and carrying a roll of music rather loosely in the crook of her arm. In an instant he had snatched the roll away and sent the sheets spread-eagling up the street, looking like so many big white butterflies as they flapped and whirled deliriously hither and thither.

The girl made an ineffectual grab at them and then dashed in pursuit, while a small greengrocer's boy, whose time was his master's (ergo, his own), joined in the chase with enthusiasm.

Given a high wind and half-a-dozen loose sheets of music, the elusive quality of the latter seems to be something almost supernatural, not to say diabolical, and the pursuit would probably have been a lengthy one but for the fact that a

tall man, who was rapidly advancing from the opposite direction, seeing the girl's predicament, came to her help and headed off the truant sheets. Within a few moments the combined efforts of the girl, the man, and the greengrocer's boy were successful in gathering them together once more, and having tipped the boy, who had entered thoroughly into the spirit of the thing and who was grinning broadly, she turned, laughing and rather breathless, to thank the man.

But the laughter died suddenly away from her lips as she encountered the absolute lack of response in his face. It remained quite grave and unsmiling, exactly as though its owner had not been engaged, only two minutes before, in a wild and undignified chase after half-a-dozen sheets of paper which persisted in pirouetting maddeningly just out of reach.

The face was that of a man of about thirty-five, clean-shaven and fair-skinned, with arresting blue eyes of that peculiar piercing quality which seems to read right into the secret places of one's mind. The features were clear-cut—straight nose, square chin, the mouth rather sternly set, yet with a delicate uplift at its corners that gave it a singularly sweet expression.

The girl faltered.

"Thank you so much," she murmured at last.

The man's deep-set blue eyes swept her from head to foot in a single comprehensive glance.

"I am very glad to have been of service," he said briefly.

With a slight bow he raised his hat and passed on, moving swiftly down the street, leaving her staring surprisedly after him and vaguely feeling that she had been snubbed.

To Diana Quentin this sensation was something of a novelty. As a rule, the men who were brought into contact with her quite obviously acknowledged her distinctly charming personality, but this one had marched away with uncompromising haste and as unconcernedly as though she had been merely the greengrocer's boy, and he had been assisting him in the recovery of some errant Brussels sprouts.

For a moment an amused smile hovered about her lips; then the recollection of her business in Grellingham Place came back to her with a suddenly sobering effect and she hastened on her way up the street, pausing at last at No. 57. She mounted the steps reluctantly, and with a nervous, spasmodic intake of the breath pressed the bell-button.

No one came to answer the door—for the good and sufficient reason that Diana's timid pressure had failed to elicit even the faintest sound—and its four blank brown panels seemed to stare at her forbiddingly. She stared back at them, her heart sinking ever lower and lower the while, for behind those repellent portals dwelt the great man whose "Yea" or "Nay" meant so much to her—Carlo Baroni, the famous teacher of singing, whose verdict upon any voice was one from which there could be no appeal.

Diana wondered how many other aspirants to fame had lingered like herself upon that doorstep, their hearts beating high with hope, only to descend the white-washed steps a brief hour later with the knowledge that from the standpoint of the musical profession their voices were useless for all practical purposes, and with their pockets lighter by two guineas, the *maestro's* fee for an opinion.

The wind swept up the street again and Diana shivered, her teeth chattering partly with cold but even more with nervousness. This was a bad preparation for the coming interview, and with an irritation born of despair she pressed the bell-button to such good purpose that she could hear footsteps approaching, almost before the trill of the bell had vibrated into silence.

An irreproachable man-servant, with the face of a sphinx, opened the door.

Diana tried to speak, failed, then, moistening her lips, jerked out the words:—

"Signor Baroni?"

"Have you an appointment?" came the relentless inquiry,

and Diana could well imagine how inexorably the greatly daring who had come on chance would be turned away.

"Yes—oh, yes," she stammered. "For three o'clock—Miss Diana Quentin."

"Come this way, please." The man stood aside for her to enter, and a minute later she found herself following him through a narrow hall to the door of a room whence issued the sound of a softly-played pianoforte accompaniment.

The sphinx-like one threw open the door and announced her name, and with quaking knees she entered.

The room was a large one. At its further end stood a grand piano, so placed that whoever was playing commanded a full view of the remainder of the room, and at this moment the piano-stool was occupied by Signor Baroni himself, evidently in the midst of giving a lesson to a young man who was standing at his elbow. He was by no means typically Italian in appearance; indeed, his big frame and finely-shaped head with its massive, Beethoven brow reminded one forcibly of the fact that his mother had been of German origin. But the heavy-lidded, prominent eyes, neither brown nor hazel but a mixture of the two, and the sallow skin and long, mobile lips—these were unmistakably Italian. The nose was slightly Jewish in its dominating quality, and the hair that was tossed back over his head and descended to the edge of his collar with true musicianly luxuriance was grizzled by sixty years of strenuous life. It would seem that God had taken an Italian, a German, and a Jew, and out of them welded a surpassing genius.

Baroni nodded casually towards Diana, and, still continuing to play with one hand, gestured towards an easy-chair with the other.

"How do you do? Will you sit down, please," he said, speaking with a strong, foreign accent, and then apparently forgot all about her.

"Now"—he turned to the young man whose lesson her

entry had interrupted—"we will haf this through once more. Bee-gin, please: *'In all humility I worship thee.'* "

Obediently the young man opened his mouth, and in a magnificent baritone voice declaimed that reverently, and from a great way off, he ventured to worship at his beloved's shrine, while Diana listened spell-bound.

If this were the only sort of voice Baroni condescended to train, what chance had she? And the young man's singing seemed so finished, the fervour of his passion was so vehemently rendered, that she humbly wondered that there still remained anything for him to learn. It was almost like listening to a professional.

Quite suddenly Baroni dropped his hands from the piano and surveyed the singer with such an eloquent mixture of disgust and bitter contempt in his extraordinarily expressive eyes that Diana positively jumped.

"Ach! So that is your idea of a humble suitor, is it?" he said, and though he never raised his voice above the rather husky, whispering tones that seemed habitual to him, it cut like a lash. Later, Diana was to learn that Baroni's most scathing criticisms and most furious reproofs were always delivered in a low, half-whispering tone that fairly seared the victim. "That is your idea, then—to shout, and yell, and bellow your love like a caged bull? When will you learn that music is not noise, and that love—love"—and the odd, husky voice thrilled suddenly to a note as soft and tender as the cooing of a wood-pigeon—"can be expressed *piano*—ah, but *pianissimo*—as well as by blowing great blasts of sound from those leathern bellows which you call your lungs?"

The too-forceful baritone stood abashed, shifting uneasily from one foot to the other. With a swift motion Baroni swept up the music from the piano and shovelled it pell-mell into the young man's arms.

"Oh, go away, go away!" he said impatiently. "You

are a voice—just a voice—and nothing more. You will *nevaire* be an artist!" And he turned his back on him.

Very dejectedly the young man made his way towards the door, whilst Diana, overcome with sympathy and horror at his abrupt dismissal, could hardly refrain from rushing forward to intercede for him.

And then, to her intense amazement, Baroni whisked suddenly round, and following the young man to the door, laid his hand on his shoulder.

"*Au revoir, mon brave,*" he said, with the utmost bonhomie. "Bring the song next time and we will go through it again. But do not be discouraged—no, for there is no need. It will come—it will come. But remember, *piano—piano—pianissimo!*"

And with a reassuring pat on the shoulder he pushed the young man affectionately through the doorway and closed the door behind him.

So he had not been dismissed in disgrace after all! Diana breathed a sigh of relief, and, looking up, found Signor Baroni regarding her with a large and benevolent smile.

"You theenk I was too severe with him?" he said placidly. "But no. He is like iron, that young man; he wants hammer-blows."

"I think he got them," replied Diana crisply, and then stopped, aghast at her own temerity. She glanced anxiously at Baroni to see if he had resented her remark, only to find him surveying her with a radiant smile and looking exactly like a large, pleased child.

"We shall get on, the one with the other," he observed contentedly. "Yes, we shall get on. And now—who are you? I do not remember names"—with a terrific roll of his R's—"but you haf a very pree-ty face—and I never forget a pree-ty face."

"I'm—I'm Diana Quentin," she blurted out, nervousness once more overpowering her as she realised that the moment

of her ordeal was approaching. "I've come to have my voice tried."

Baroni picked up a memorandum book from his table, turning over the pages till he came to her name.

"Ach! I remember now. Miss Waghorne—my old pupil—sent you. She has been teaching you, isn't it so?"

Diana nodded.

"Yes, I've had a few lessons from her, and she hoped that possibly you would take me as a pupil."

It was out at last—the proposal which now, in the actual presence of the great man himself, seemed nothing less than a piece of stupendous presumption.

Signor Baroni's eyes roamed inquiringly over the face and figure of the girl before him—quite possibly querying as to whether or no she possessed the requisite physique for a singer. Nevertheless, the great master was by no means proof against the argument of a pretty face. There was a story told of him that, on one occasion, a girl with an exceptionally fine voice had been brought to him, some wealthy patroness having promised to defray the expenses of her training if Baroni would accept her as a pupil. Unfortunately, the girl was distinctly plain, with a quite uninteresting plainness of the pasty, podgy description, and after he had heard her sing, the *maestro,* first dismissing her from the room, had turned to the lady who was prepared to stand sponsor for her, and had said, with an inimitable shrug of his massive shoulders:—

"The voice—it is all right. But the girl—heavens, madame, she is of an ugliness! And I cannot teach ugly people. She has the face of a peeg—please take her away."

But there was little fear that a similar fate would befall Diana. Her figure, though slight with the slenderness of immaturity, was built on the right lines, and her young, eager face, in its frame of raven hair, was as vivid as a flower—its clear pallor serving but to emphasise the beauty of the straight, dark brows and of the scarlet mouth with

its ridiculously short upper-lip. Her eyes were of that peculiarly light grey which, when accompanied, as hers were, by thick black lashes, gives an almost startling impression each time the lids are lifted, an odd suggestion of inner radiance that was vividly arresting.

An intense vitality, a curious shy charm, the sensitiveness inseparable from the artist nature—all these, and more, Baroni's experienced eye read in Diana's upturned face, but it yet remained for him to test the quality of her vocal organs.

"Well, we shall see," he said non-committally. "I do not take many pupils."

Diana's heart sank yet a little lower, and she felt almost tempted to seek refuge in immediate flight rather than remain to face the inevitable dismissal that she guessed would be her portion.

Baroni, however, put a summary stop to any such wild notions by turning on her with the lightning-like change of mood which she came afterwards to know as characteristic of him.

"You haf brought some songs?" He held out his hand. "Good. Let me see them."

He glanced swiftly through the roll of music which she tendered.

"This one—we will try this. Now"—seating himself at the piano—"open your mouth, little nightingale, and sing."

Softly he played the opening bars of the prelude to the song, and Diana watched fascinatedly while he made the notes speak, and sing, and melt into each other with his short stumpy fingers that looked as though they and music would have little enough in common.

"Now then. Bee-gin."

And Diana began. But she was so nervous that she felt as though her throat had suddenly closed up, and only a faint, quavering note issued from her lips, breaking off abruptly in a hoarse croak.

Baroni stopped playing.

"Tchut! she is frightened," he said, and laid an encouraging hand on her shoulder. "But do not be frightened, my dear. You haf a pree-ty face; if your voice is as pree-ty as your face you need not haf fear."

Diana was furious with herself for failing at the critical moment, and even more angry at Baroni's speech, in which she sensed a suggestion of the tolerance extended to the aver-age drawing-room singer of mediocre powers.

"I don't want to have a *pretty* voice!" she broke out, passionately. "I wouldn't say thank you for it."

And anger having swallowed up her nervousness, she opened her mouth—and her throat with it this time?—and let out the full powers that were hidden within her nice big larynx.

When she ceased, Baroni closed the open pages of the song, and turning on his stool, regarded her for a moment in silence.

"No," he said at last, dispassionately. "It is certainly not a pree-ty voice."

To Diana's ears there was such a tone of indifference, such an air of utter finality about the brief speech, that she felt she would have been eternally grateful now could she only have passed the low standard demanded by the possession of even a merely "pretty" voice.

"So this is the voice you bring me to cultivate?" continued the *maestro*. "This that sounds like the rumblings of a subterranean earthquake? Boom! boo-o-om! Like that, *nicht wahr?*"

Diana crimsoned, and, feeling her knees giving way beneath her, sank into the nearest chair, while Baroni continued to stare at her.

"Then—then you cannot take me as a pupil?" she said faintly.

Apparently he did not hear her, for he asked abruptly:—

"Are you prepared to give up everything—everything in

the world for art? She is no easy task-mistress, remember! She will want a great deal of your time, and she will rob you of your pleasures, and for her sake you will haf to take care of your body—to guard your physical health—as though it were the most precious thing on earth. To become a great singer, a great artiste, means a life of self-denial. Are you prepared for this?"

"But—but——" stammered Diana in astonishment. "If my voice is not even pretty—if it is no good——"

"No good?" he exclaimed, leaping to his feet with a rapidity of movement little short of marvellous in a man of his size and bulk. *"Gran Dio!* No good, did you say? But, my child, you haf a voice of gold—pure gold. In three years of my training it will become the voice of the century. Tchut! No good!"

He pranced nimbly to the door and flung it open.

"Giulia! Giulia!" he shouted, and a minute later a fat, amiable-looking woman, whose likeness to Baroni proclaimed them brother and sister, came hurrying downstairs in answer to his call. "Signora Evanci, my sister," he said, nodding to Diana. "This, Giulia, is a new pupil, and I would haf you hear her voice. It is magnificent—*épatant!* Open your mouth, little singing-bird, once more. This time we will haf some scales."

Bewildered and excited, Diana sang again, Baroni testing the full compass of her voice until quite suddenly he shut down the lid of the piano.

"It is enough," he said solemnly, and then, turning to Signora Evanci, began talking to her in an excited jumble of English and Italian. Diana caught broken phrases here and there.

"Of a quality superb! . . . And a beeg compass which will grow beeger yet. . . . The contralto of the century, Giulia."

And Signora Evanci smiled and nodded agreement, patting Diana's hand, and reminded Baroni that it was time

for his afternoon cup of consommé. She was a comfortable feather-bed of a woman, whose mission in life it seemed to be to fend off from her brother all sharp corners, and to see that he took his food at the proper intervals and changed into the thick underclothing necessitated by the horrible English climate.

"But it will want much training, your voice," continued Baroni, turning once more to Diana. "It is so beeg that it is all over the place—it sounds like a clap of thunder that has lost his way in a back garden." And he smiled indulgently. "To bee-gin with, you will put away all your songs—every one. There will be nothing but exercises for months yet. And you will come for your first lesson on Thursday. Mondays and Thursdays I will teach you, but you must come other days, also, and listen at my lessons. There is much—very much—learned by listening, if one listens with the brain as well as with the ear. Now, little singing-bird, good-bye. I will go with you myself to the door."

The whole thing seemed too impossibly good to be true. Diana felt as if she were in the middle of a beautiful dream from which she might at any moment waken to the disappointing reality of things. Hardly able to believe the evidence of her senses, she found herself once again in the narrow hall, shepherded by the *maestro's* portly form. As he held the door open for her to pass out into the street, some one ran quickly up the steps, pausing on the topmost.

"Ha, Olga!" exclaimed Baroni, beaming. "You haf returned just too late to hear Mees Quentin. But you will play for her—many times yet." Then, turning to Diana, he added by way of introduction: "This is my accompanist, Mees Lermontof."

Diana received the impression of a thin, satirical face, its unusual pallor picked out by the black brows and hair, of a bitter-looking mouth that hardly troubled itself to smile in salutation, and, above all, of a pair of queer green eyes,

which, as the heavy, opaque white lids above them lifted, seemed slowly—and rather contemptuously—to take her in from head to foot.

She bowed, and as Miss Lermontof inclined her head slightly in response, there was a kind of cold aloofness in her bearing—a something defiantly repellent—which filled Diana with a sudden sense of dislike, almost of fear. It was as though the sun had all at once gone behind a cloud.

The Baroni's voice fell on her ears, and the disagreeable tension snapped.

"*A rivederci,* little singing-bird. On Thursday we will bee-gin."

The door closed on the *maestro's* benevolently smiling face, and on that other—the dark, satirical face of Olga Lermontof—and Diana found herself once again breasting the March wind as it came roystering up through Grellingham Place.

CHAPTER II

FELLOW-TRAVELLERS

"LOOK sharp, miss, jump in! Luggage in the rear van." The porter hoisted her almost bodily up the steps of the railway carriage, slamming the door behind her, the guard's whistle shrieked, and an instant later the train started with a jerk that sent Diana staggering against the seat of the compartment, upon which she finally subsided, breathless but triumphant.

She had very nearly missed the train. An organised procession of some kind had been passing through the streets just as she was driving to the station, and her taxi had been held up for the full ten minutes' grace which she had allowed herself, the metre fairly ticking its heart out in impotent rage behind the policeman's uplifted hand.

So it was with a sigh of relief that she found herself at last comfortably installed in a corner seat of a first-class carriage. She glanced about her to make sure that she had not mislaid any of her hand baggage in her frantic haste, and this point being settled to her satisfaction, she proceeded to take stock of her fellow-traveller, for there was one other person in the compartment besides herself.

He was sitting in the corner furthest away, his back to the engine, apparently entirely oblivious of her presence. On his knee rested a quarto writing-pad, and he appeared so much absorbed in what he was writing that Diano doubted whether he had even heard the commotion occasioned by her sudden entry.

But she was mistaken. As the porter had bundled her into the carriage, the man in the corner had raised a pair

of deep-set blue eyes, looked at her for a moment with a half-startled glance, and then, with the barest flicker of a smile, had let his eyes drop once more upon his writing-pad.

Then he crossed out the word "Kismet," which he had inadvertently written.

Diana regarded him with interest. He was probably an author, she decided, and since a year's training as a professional singer had brought her into contact with all kinds of people who earned their livings by their brains, as she herself hoped to do some day, she instantly felt a friendly interest in him. She liked, too, the shape of the hand that held the fountain-pen; it was a slender, sensitive-looking member with well-kept nails, and Diana always appreciated nice hands. The man's head was bent over his work, so that she could only obtain a foreshortened glimpse of his face, but he possessed a supple length of limb that even the heavy travelling-rug tucked around his knees failed to disguise, and there was a certain *soigné* air of rightness about the way he wore his clothes which pleased her.

Suddenly becoming conscious that she was staring rather openly, she turned her eyes away and looked out of the window, and immediately encountered a big broad label, pasted on to the glass, with the word *"Reserved"* printed on it in capital letters. The letters, of course, appeared reversed to any one inside the carriage, but they were so big and black and hectoring that they were quite easily deciphered.

Evidently, in his violent haste to get her on board the train, the porter had thrust her into the privacy of some one's reserved compartment, that some one being the man opposite. What a horrible predicament! Diana felt hot all over with embarrassment, and, starting to her feet, stammered out a confused apology.

The man in the corner raised his head.

"It does not matter in the least," he assured her indiffer-

ıtly. "Please do not distress yourself. I believe the train very crowded; you had better sit down again."

The chilly lack of interest in his tones struck Diana with ı odd sense of familiarity, but she was too preoccupied to well on it, and began hastily to collect together her dressing- ıse and other odds and ends.

"I'll find another seat," she said stiffly, and made her way ıt into the corridor of the rocking train.

Her search, however, proved quite futile; every compart- ent was packed with people hurrying out of town for aster, and in a few moments she returned.

"I'm sorry," she said, rather shyly. "Every seat is taken. 'm afraid you'll have to put up with me."

Just then the carriage gave a violent lurch, as the express wung around a bend, and Diana, dropping everything she eld, made a frantic clutch at the rack above her head, while er goods and chattels shot across the floor, her dressing-case liding gaily along till its wild career was checked against ıe foot of the man in the corner.

With an air of resignation he rose and retrieved her be- ongings, placing them on the seat opposite her.

"It would have been better if you had taken my advice," ıe observed, with a sort of weary patience.

Diana felt unreasonably angry with him.

"Why don't you say 'I told you so' at once?" she said artly.

A whimsical smile crossed his face.

"Well, I did, didn't I?"

He stood for a moment looking down at her, steadying imself with one hand against the doorway, and her ill- umour vanishing as quickly as it had arisen, she returned he smile.

"Yes, you did. And you were quite right, too," she ac- nowledged frankly.

He laughed outright.

"Well done!" he cried. "Not one woman in twenty will own herself in the wrong as a rule."

Diana frowned.

"I don't agree with you at all," she bristled. "Men have a ridiculous way of lumping all women together and then generalising about them."

"Let's discuss the question," he said gaily. "May I?" And scarcely waiting for her permission, he deliberately moved aside her things and seated himself opposite her.

"But you were busy writing," she protested.

He threw an indifferent glance in the direction of his writing-pad, where it lay on the seat in the corner.

"Was I?" he answered calmly. "Sometimes there are better things to do than scribbling—pleasanter ones, anyway."

Diana flushed. It certainly was an unusual thing to do, to get into conversation with an unknown man with whom one chanced to be travelling, and she had never before committed such a breach of the conventions—would have been shocked at the bare idea of it—but there was something rather irresistible about this man's cool self-possession. He seemed to assume that a thing must of necessity be right, since he chose to do it.

She looked up and met his eyes watching her with a glint of amusement in their depths.

"No, it isn't quite proper," he agreed, answering her unspoken thought. "But I've never bothered about that if I really wanted to do a thing. And don't you think"—still with that flicker of laughter in his eyes—"that it's rather ridiculous, when two human beings are shut up in a box together for several hours, for each of them to behave as though the other weren't there?"

He spoke half-mockingly, and Diana felt that within himself he was ridiculing her prim little notions of conventionality. She flushed uncomfortably.

"Yes, I—I suppose so," she faltered.

He seemed to understand.

"Forgive me," he said, with a sudden gentleness. "I wasn't laughing at you, but only at all the absurd conventions by which we cut ourselves off from many an hour of pleasant intercourse—just as though we had any too many pleasures in life! But if you wish it, I'll go back to my corner."

"No, no, don't go," returned Diana hastily. "It—it was silly of me."

"Then we may talk? Good. I shall behave quite nicely, I assure you."

Again the curiously familiar quality in his voice! She was positive she had heard it before—that crisp, unslurred enunciation, with its keen perception of syllabic values, so unlike the average Englishman's slovenly rendering of his mother-tongue.

"Of what are you thinking?" he asked, smiling. And then the swift, hawk-like glance of the blue eyes brought with it a sudden, sure sense of recognition, stinging the slumbering cells of memory into activity. A picture shaped itself in her mind of a blustering March day, and of a girl, a man, and an errand-boy, careering wildly in the roadway of a London street, while some stray sheets of music went whirling hither and thither in the wind. It had all happened a year ago, on that critical day when Baroni had consented to accept her as his pupil, but the recollection of it, and the odd, snubbed feeling she had experienced in regard to the man with the blue eyes, was as clear in her mind as though it had occurred only yesterday.

"I believe we have met before, haven't we?" she said.

The look of gay good-humour vanished suddenly from his face and an expression of blank inquiry took its place.

"I think not," he replied.

"Oh, but I'm sure of it. Don't you remember"—brightly—"about a year ago. I was carrying some music, and it all

blew away up the street and you helped me to collect it again?"

He shook his head.

"I think you must be mistaken," he answered regretfully.

"No, no," she persisted, but beginning to experience some slight embarrassment. (It *is* embarrassing to find you have betrayed a keen and vivid recollection of a man who has apparently forgotten that he ever set eyes on you!) "Oh, you must remember—it was in Grellingham Place, and the greengrocer's boy helped as well."

She broke off, reading the polite negation in his face.

"You must be confusing me with some one else. I should not be likely to—forget—so charming a *rencontre*."

There was surely a veiled mockery in his composed tones, irreproachably courteous though they were, and Diana coloured hotly. Somehow, this man possessed the faculty of making her feel awkward and self-conscious and horribly young; he himself was so essentially of the polished type of cosmopolitan that beside him she felt herself to be as raw and crude as any bread-and-butter miss fresh from the schoolroom. Moreover, she had an inward conviction that in reality he recollected the incident in Grellingham Place as clearly as she did herself, although he refused to admit it.

She relapsed into an uncomfortable silence, and presently the attendant from the restaurant car came along the corridor and looked in to ask if they were going to have dinner on the train. Both nodded an affirmative.

"Table for two?" he queried, evidently taking them to be two friends travelling together.

Diana was about to enlighten him when her *vis-à-vis* leaned forward hastily.

"Please," he said persuasively, and as she returned no answer he apparently took her silence for consent, for something passed unobtrusively from his hand to that of the attendant, and the latter touched his hat with a smiling—

"Right you are, sir! I'll reserve a table for two."

Diana felt that the acquaintance was progressing rather faster than she could have wished, but she hardly knew how to check it. Finally she mustered up courage to say firmly:—

"It must only be if I pay for my own dinner."

"But, of course," he answered courteously, with the slightest tinge of surprise in his tones, and once again Diana felt that she had made a fool of herself and blushed to the tips of her ears.

A faint smile trembled for an instant on his lips, and then, without apparently noticing her confusion, he began to talk, passing easily from one subject to another until she had regained her confidence, finally leading her almost imperceptibly into telling him about herself.

In the middle of dinner she paused, aghast at her own loquacity.

"But what a horrible egotist you must think me!" she exclaimed. "I've been talking about my own affairs all the time."

"Not at all. I'm interested. This Signor Baroni who is training your voice—he is the finest teacher in the world. You must have a very beautiful voice for him to have accepted you as a pupil." There was a hint of surprise in his tones.

"Oh, no," she hastened to assure him modestly. "I expect it was more that I had the luck to catch him in a good mood that afternoon."

"And his moods vary considerably, don't they?" he said, smiling as though at some personal recollection.

"Oh, do you know him?" asked Diana eagerly.

In an instant his face became a blank mask; it was as though a shutter had descended, blotting out all its vivacious interest.

"I have met him," he responded briefly. Then, turning the subject adroitly, he went on: "So now you are on your way home for a well-earned holiday? Your people must be

looking forward to seeing you after so long a time—you have been away a year, didn't you say?"

"Yes, I spent the other two vacations abroad, in Italy, for the sake of acquiring the language. Signor Baroni"—laughingly—"was horror-stricken at my Italian, so he insisted. But I have no people—not really, you know," she continued. "I live with my guardian and his daughter. Both my parents died when I was quite young."

"You are not very old now," he interjected.

"I'm eighteen," she answered seriously.

"It's a great age," he acknowledged, with equal gravity.

Just then a waiter sped forward and with praiseworthy agility deposited their coffee on the table without spilling a drop, despite the swaying of the train, and Diana's fellow-traveller produced his cigarette-case.

"Will you smoke?" he asked.

She looked at the cigarettes longingly.

"Baroni's forbidden me to smoke," she said, hesitating a little. "Do you think—just one—would hurt my voice?"

The short black lashes flew up, and the light-grey eyes, like a couple of stars between black clouds, met his in irresistible appeal.

"I'm sure it wouldn't," he replied promptly. "After all, this is just an hour's playtime that we have snatched out of life. Let's enjoy every minute of it—we may never meet again."

Diana felt her heart contract in a most unexpected fashion.

"Oh, I hope we shall!" she exclaimed, with ingenuous warmth.

"It is not likely," he returned quietly. He struck a match and held it while she lit her cigarette, and for an instant their fingers touched. His teeth came down hard on his under-lip. "No, we mustn't meet again," he repeated in a low voice.

"Oh, well, you never know," insisted Diana, with cheerful optimism. 'People run up against each other in the

ost extraordinary fashion. And I expect we shall, too."
"I don't think so," he said. "If I thought that we
ould——" He broke off abruptly, frowning.
"Why, I don't believe you *want* to meet me again!" ex-
aimed Diana, with a note in her voice like that of a hurt
ild.
"Oh, for that!" He shrugged his shoulders. "If we
uld have what we wanted in this world! Though I mustn't
mplain—I have had this hour. And I wanted it!" he
lded, with a sudden intensity.
"So much that you propose to make it last you for the
mainder of your life?"—smiling.
"It will have to," he answered grimly.
After dinner they made their way back from the restau-
nt car to their compartment, and noticing that she looked
ther white and tired, he suggested that she should tuck
rself up on the seat and go to sleep.
"But supposing I didn't wake at the right time?" she
jected. "I might be carried past my station and find
yself heaven knows where in the small hours of the morn-
g! . . . I *am* sleepy, though."
"Let me be call-boy," he suggested. "Where do you want
get out?"
"At Craiford Junction. That's the station for Crailing,
ere I'm going. Do you know it at all? It's a tiny village
Devonshire; my guardian is the Rector there."
"Crailing?" An odd expression crossed his face and he
sitated a moment. At last, apparently coming to a deci-
on of some kind, he said: "Then I must wake you up
en I go, as I'm getting out before that."
"Can I trust you?" she asked sleepily.
"Surely."
She had curled herself up on the seat with her feet
etched out in front of her, one narrow foot resting lightly
the instep of the other, and she looked up at him specu-

latively from between the double fringe of her short bla
lashes.

"Yes, I believe I can," she acquiesced, with a little smil

He tucked his travelling rug deftly round her, and, pu
ing on his overcoat, went back to his former corner, whe
he picked up the neglected writing-pad and began scribbli
in a rather desultory fashion.

Very soon her even breathing told him that she slept, a
he laid aside the pad and sat quietly watching her. S
looked very young and childish as she lay there, with t
faint shadows of fatigue beneath her closed eyes—there w
something appealing about her very helplessness. Present
the rug slipped a little, and he saw her hand groping vague
for it. Quietly he tiptoed across the compartment and dre
it more closely about her.

"Thank you—so much," she murmured drowsily, and t
man looking down at her caught his breath sharply betwi
his teeth. Then, with an almost imperceptible shrug of h
shoulders, he stepped back and resumed his seat.

The express sped on through the night, the little tw
globes of light high up in the carriage ceiling jumping a
flickering as it swung along the metals.

Down the track it flew like a living thing, a red glo
marking its passage as it cleft the darkness, its freight
human souls contentedly sleeping, or smoking, or readin
as the fancy took them. And half a mile ahead on the pe
manent way, Death stood watching—watching and waiti
where, by some hideous accident of fate, a faulty couplin
rod had snapped asunder in the process of shunting, leavi
a solitary coal-truck to slide slowly back into the shado
of the night, unseen, the while its fellows were safely dra
on to a siding.

CHAPTER III

AN ENCOUNTER WITH DEATH

ONE moment the even throbbing of the engine as the train slipped along through the silence of the country-side —the next, and the silence was split by a shattering roar and the shock of riven plates, the clash of iron driven against iron, and of solid woodwork grinding and grating as it splintered into wreckage.

Diana, suddenly—horribly—awake, found herself hurled from her seat. Absolute darkness lapped her round; it was as though a thick black curtain had descended, blotting out the whole world, while from behind it, immeasurably hideous in that utter night, uprose an inferno of cries and shrieks—the clamour of panic-stricken humanity.

Her hands, stretched stiffly out in front of her to ward off she knew not what impending horror hidden by the dark, came in contact with the framework of the window, and in an instant she was clinging to it, pressing up against it with her body, her fingers gripping and clutching at it as a rat, trapped in a well, claws madly at a projecting bit of stonework. It was at least something solid out of that awful void.

"What's happened? What's happened? What's happened?"

She was whispering the question over and over again in a queer, whimpering voice without the remotest idea of what she was saying. When a stinging pain shot through her arm, as a jagged point of broken glass bit into the flesh, and with a scream of utter, unreasoning terror she let go her hold.

The next moment she felt herself grasped and held by a pair of arms, and a voice spoke to her out of the darkness.

"Are you hurt? . . . My God, are you hurt?"

With a sob of relief she realised that it was the voice of her fellow-traveller. He was here, close to her, something alive and human in the midst of this nightmare of awful, unspeakable fear, and she clung to him, shuddering.

"Speak, can't you?" His utterance sounded hoarse and distorted. "You're hurt——?" And she felt his hands slide searchingly along her limbs, feeling and groping.

"No—no."

"Thank God!" He spoke under his breath. Then, giving her a shake: "Come, pull yourself together. We must get out of this."

He fumbled in his pocket and she heard the rattle of a matchbox, and an instant later a flame spurted out in the gloom as he lit a bundle of matches together. In the brief illumination she could see the floor of the compartment steeply tilted up and at its further end what looked like a huge, black cavity. The whole side of the carriage had been wrenched away.

"Come on!" exclaimed the man, catching her by the hand and pulling her forward towards that yawning space. "We must jump for it. It'll be a big drop. I'll catch you."

At the edge of the gulf he paused. Below, with eyes grown accustomed to the darkness, she could discern figures running to and fro, and lanterns flashing, while shouts and cries rose piercingly above a continuous low undertone of moaning.

"Stand here," he directed her. "I'll let myself down, and when I call to you—jump."

She caught at him frantically.

"Don't go—don't leave me."

He disengaged himself roughly from her clinging hands.

"It only wants a moment's pluck," he said, "and then you'll be safe."

The next minute he was over the side, hanging by his hands from the edge of the bent and twisted flooring of the carriage, and a second afterwards she heard him drop. Peering out, she could see him standing on the ground below, his arms held out towards her.

"Jump!" he called.

But she shrank from the drop into the darkness.

"I can't!" she sobbed helplessly. "I can't!"

He approached a step nearer, and the light from some torch close at hand flashed onto his uplifted face. She could see it clearly, tense and set, the blue eyes blazing.

"God in heaven!" he cried furiously. "Do what I tell you. *Jump!*"

The fierce, imperative command startled her into action, and she jumped blindly, recklessly, out into the night. There was one endless moment of uncertainty, and then she felt herself caught by arms like steel and set gently upon the ground.

"You little fool!" he said thickly. He was breathing heavily as though he had been running; she could feel his chest heave as, for an instant, he held her pressed against him.

He released her almost immediately, and taking her by the arm, led her to the embankment, where he stripped off his overcoat and wrapped it about her. But she was hardly conscious of what he was doing, for suddenly everything seemed to be spinning round her. The lights of the torches bobbed up and down in a confused blur of twinkling stars, the sound of voices and the trampling of feet came faintly to her ears as from a great way off, while the grim, black bulk of the piled-up coaches of the train seemed to lean nearer and nearer, until finally it swooped down on top of her and she sank into a sea of impenetrable darkness.

The next thing she remembered was finding a flask held to her lips, while a familiar voice commanded her to drink. She shook her head feebly.

"Drink it at once," the voice insisted. "Do you hear?"

And because her mind held some dim recollection of the futility of gainsaying that peremptory voice, she opened her lips obediently and let the strong spirit trickle down her throat.

"Better now?" queried the voice.

She nodded, and then, complete consciousness returning, she sat up.

"I'm all right now—really," she said.

The owner of the voice regarded her critically.

"Yes, I think you'll do now," he returned. "Stay where you are. I'm going along to see if I can help, but I'll come back to you again."

The darkness swallowed him up, and Diana sat very still on the embankment, vibrantly conscious in every nerve of her of the man's cool, dominating personality. Gradually her thoughts returned to the happenings of the moment, and then the full horror of what had occurred came back to her. She began to cry weakly. But the tears did her good, bringing with them relief from the awful shock which had strained her nerves almost to breaking-point, and with return to a more normal state of mind came the instinctive wish to help—to do something for those who must be suffering so pitiably in the midst of that scarred heap of wreckage on the line.

She scrambled to her feet and made her way nearer to the mass of crumpled coaches that reared up black against the shimmer of the starlit sky. No one took any notice of her; all who were unhurt were working to save and help those who had been less fortunate, and every now and then some broken wreck of humanity was carried past her, groaning horribly, or still more horribly silent.

Suddenly a woman brushed against her—a young woman of the working classes, her plump face sagging and mottled with terror, her eyes staring, her clothes torn and dishevelled.

"My chiel, my li'l chiel!" she kept on muttering. "Wur be 'ee? Wur be 'ee?"

Reaching her through the dreadful strangeness of disaster, the soft Devon dialect smote on Diana's ears with a sense of dear familiarity that was almost painful. She laid her hand on the woman's arm.

"What is it?" she asked. "Have you lost your child?"

The woman looked at her vaguely, bewildered by the surrounding horror.

"Iss. Us dunnaw wur er's tu; er's dade, I reckon. Aw, my li'l, li'l chiel!" And she rocked to and fro, clutching her shawl more closely round her.

Diana put a few brief questions and elicited that the woman and her child had both been taken unhurt out of a third-class carriage—of the ten souls who had occupied the compartment the only ones to escape injury.

"I'll go and look for him," she told her. "I expect he has only strayed away and lost sight of you amongst all these people. Four years old and wearing a little red coat, did you say? I'll find him for you; you sit down here." And she pushed the poor distraught creature down on a pile of shattered woodwork. "Don't be frightened," she added reassuringly. "I feel certain he's quite safe."

She disappeared into the throng, and after searching for a while came face to face with her fellow traveller, carrying a chubby, red-coated little boy in his arms. He stopped abruptly.

"What in the world are you doing?" he demanded angrily. "You've no business here. Go back—you'll only see some ghastly sights if you come, and you can't help. Why didn't you stay where I told you to?"

But Diana paid no heed.

"I want that child," she said eagerly, holding out her arms. "The mother's nearly out of her mind—she thinks he's killed, and I told her I'd go and look for him."

"Is this the child? . . . All right, then, I'll carry him along for you. Where did you leave his mother?"

Diana led the way to where the woman was sitting, still rocking herself to and fro in dumb misery. At the sight of the child she leapt up and clutched him in her arms, half crazy with joy and gratitude, and a few sympathetic tears stole down Diana's cheeks as she and her fellow-helper moved away, leaving the mother and child together.

The man beside her drew her arm brusquely within his.

"You're not going near that—that hell again. Do you hear?" he said harshly.

His face looked white and drawn; it was smeared with dirt, and his clothes were torn and dishevelled. Here and there his coat was stained with dark, wet patches. Diana shuddered a little, guessing what those patches were.

"*You've* been helping!" she burst out passionately. "Did you want me to sit still and do nothing while—while that is going on just below?" And she pointed to where the injured were being borne along on roughly improvised stretchers. A sob climbed to her throat and her voice shook as she continued: "I was safe, you see, thanks to you. And—and I felt I must go and help a little, if I could."

"Yes—I suppose you would feel that," he acknowledged, a sort of grudging approval in his tones. "But there's nothing more one can do now. An emergency train is coming soon and then we shall get away—those that are left of us. But what's this?"—he felt her sleeve—"Your arm is all wet." He pushed up the loose coat-sleeve and swung the light of his lantern upon the thin silk of her blouse beneath it. It was caked with blood, while a trickle of red still oozed slowly from under the wristband and ran down over her hand.

"You're hurt! Why didn't you tell me?"

"It's nothing," she answered. "I cut it against the glass of the carriage window. It doesn't hurt much."

"Let me look at it. Here, take the lantern."

Diana obeyed, laughing a little nervously, and he turned back her sleeve, exposing a nasty red gash on the slender arm. It was only a surface wound however, and hastily procuring some water he bathed it and tied it up with his handkerchief.

"There, I think that'll be all right now," he said, pulling down her sleeve once more and fastening the wristband with deft fingers. "The emergency train will be here directly, so I'm going back to our compartment to pick up your belongings. I can climb in, I fancy. What did you leave behind?"

Diana laughed.

"What a practical man you are! Fancy thinking of such things as a forgotten coat and a dressing-bag when we've just escaped with our lives!"

"Well, you may as well have them," he returned gruffly. "Wait here." And he disappeared into the darkness, returning presently with the various odds and ends which she had left in the carriage.

Soon afterwards the emergency train came up, and those who could took their places, whilst the injured were lifted by kindly, careful hands into the ambulance compartment. The train drew slowly away from the scene of the accident, gradually gathering speed, and Diana, worn out with strain and excitement, dozed fitfully to the rhythmic rumbling of the wheels.

She woke with a start to find that the train was slowing down and her companion gathering his belongings together preparatory to departure. She sprang up and slipping off the overcoat she was still wearing, handed it back to him.

He seemed reluctant to take it from her.

"Shall you be warm enough?" he asked doubtfully.

"Oh, yes. It's only half-an-hour's run from here to Crailford Junction, and there they'll meet me with plenty of wraps." She hesitated a moment, then went on shyly: "I can't thank you properly for all you've done."

"Don't," he said curtly. "It was little enough. But I'm glad I was there."

The train came to a standstill, and she held out her hand.

"Good-bye," she said, very low.

He wrung her hand, and, releasing it abruptly, lifted his hat and disappeared amid the throng of people on the platform. And it was not until the train had steamed out of the station again that she remembered that she did not even know his name.

Very slowly she unknotted the handkerchief from about her arm, and laying the blood-stained square of linen on her knee, proceeded to examine each corner carefully. In one of them she found the initials M. E., very finely worked.

CHAPTER IV

CRAILING RECTORY

THE early morning mist still lingered in the valleys and clung about the river banks as the Reverend Alan Stair, returning from his matutinal dip in the sea, swung up the lane and pushed open the door giving access from it to the Rectory grounds. The little wooden door, painted green and overhung with ivy, was never bolted. In the primitive Devon village of Crailing such a precaution would have been deemed entirely superfluous; indeed, the locking of the door would probably have been regarded by the villagers as equivalent to a reflection on their honesty, and should the passage of time ultimately bring to the ancient rectory a fresh parson, obsessed by conventional opinion concerning the uses of bolts and bars, it is probable that the inhabitants of Crailing will manifest their disapproval in the simple and direct fashion of the Devon rustic—by placidly boycotting the church of their fathers and betaking themselves to the chapel round the corner. The little green door, innocent of lock and key, stood as a symbol of the close ties that bound the rector and his flock together, and woe betide the iconoclast who should venture to tamper with it.

The Rectory itself was a picturesque old house with latticed windows and thatched roof; the climbing roses, which in summer clothed it in a garment of crimson and pink and white, now shrouded its walls with a network of brown stems and twigs tipped with emerald buds. Beneath the warmth of the morning sun the damp was steaming from the weather-stained thatch in a cloud of pearly mist, while the starlings, nesting under the overhanging eaves, broke

into a harsh twittering of alarm at the sound of the Rector's footsteps.

Alan Stair was a big, loose-limbed son of Anak, with little of the conventional cleric in his appearance as he came striding across the dewy lawn, clad in a disreputable old suit of grey tweeds and with his bathing-towel slung around his shoulders. His hands were thrust deep into his pockets, and since he had characteristically omitted to provide himself with a hat, his abundant brown hair was rumpled and tossed by the wind, giving him an absurdly boyish air.

Arrived at the flagged path which ran the whole length of the house he sent up a Jovian shout, loud enough to arouse the most confirmed of sluggards from his slumbers, and one of the upper lattice windows flew open in response.

"That you, Dad?" called a fresh young voice.

"Sounds like it, doesn't it?" he laughed back. "Come down and give me my breakfast. There's a beautifully assorted smell of coffee and fried bacon wafting out from the dining room, and I can't bear it any longer."

An unfeeling giggle from above was the only answer, and the Reverend Alan made his way into the house, pausing to sling his bath-towel picturesquely over one of the pegs of the hat-stand as he passed through the hall.

He was incurably disorderly, and only the strenuous efforts of his daughter Joan kept the habit within bounds. Since the death of her mother, nearly ten years ago, she had striven to fill her place and to be to this lovable, grown-up boy who was her father all that his adored young wife had been. And so far as material matters were concerned, she had succeeded. She it was who usually found the MS. of his sermon when, just as the bells were calling to service, he would come leaping up the stairs, three at a time, to inform her tragically that it was lost; she who saw to it that his meals were not forgotten in the exigencies of his parish work, and who supervised his outward man to the last detail—otherwise, in one of his frequent fits of absent-

mindedness, he would have been quite capable of presenting himself at church in the identical grey tweeds he was now wearing.

Yet notwithstanding the irrepressible note of youth about him, which called forth a species of "mothering" from every woman of his acquaintance, Alan Stair was a man to whom people instinctively turned for counsel. A child in the material things of this world, he was a giant in spiritual development—broad-minded and tolerant, his religion spiced with a sense of humour and deepened by a sympathetic understanding of frail human nature. And it was to him that Ralph Quentin, when on his death-bed, had confided the care of his motherless little daughter, Diana, appointing him her sole guardian and trustee.

The two men had been friends from boyhood, and perhaps no one had better understood than Ralph, who had earlier suffered a similar loss, the terrible blank which the death of his wife had occasioned in Stair's life. The fellowship of suffering had drawn the two men together in a way that nothing else could have done, so that when Quentin made known his final wishes concerning his daughter, Alan Stair had gladly accepted the charge laid upon him, and Diana, then a child of ten, had made her permanent home at Crailing Rectory, speedily coming to look upon her guardian as a beloved elder brother, and upon his daughter, who was but two years her senior, as her greatest friend.

From the point of view of the Stairs themselves, the arrangement was not without its material advantages. Diana had inherited three hundred a year of her own, and the sum she contributed to "cover the cost of her upkeep," as she laughingly termed it when she was old enough to understand financial matters, was a very welcome addition to the slender resources provided by the value of the living.

But even had the circumstances been quite other than they were, so that the fulfilment of Ralph Quentin's last behest, instead of being an assistance to the household exchequer,

had proved to be a drain upon it, Alan Stair would have acted in precisely the same way—for the simple reason that there was never any limit to his large conception of the meaning of the word friendship and of its liabilities.

Diana had speedily carved for herself a niche of her own in the Rectory household, so that when the exigencies of her musical training, as viewed through Carlo Baroni's eyes, had necessitated her departure from Crailing for a whole year, Stair and his daughter had felt her absence keenly, and they welcomed her back with open arms.

The account of the railway accident which had attended her homeward journey had filled them with anxiety lest she should suffer from the effects of shock, and they had insisted that she should breakfast in bed this first morning of her arrival, inclining to treat her rather as though she were a semi-invalid.

"Have you been to see Diana?" asked Stair anxiously, as his daughter joined him in the dining-room.

She shook her head.

"No need. Diana's been in to see me! There's no breakfast in bed about her; she'll be down directly. Even her arm doesn't pain her much."

Stair laughed.

"What a girl it is!" he exclaimed. "One would have expected her to feel a bit shaken up after her experience yesterday."

"I fancy something else must have happened beside the railway accident," observed Joan wisely. "Something interesting enough to have outweighed the shock of the smash-up. She's in quite absurdly good spirits for some unknown reason."

The Rector chuckled.

"Perhaps a gallant rescuer was added to the experience, eh?" he said.

"Perhaps so," replied his daughter, faintly smiling as she proceeded to pour out the coffee.

Joan Stair was a typical English country girl, strictly tailor-made in her appearance, with a predisposition towards stiff linen collars and neat ties. In figure she was slight almost to boyishness and she had no pretensions whatever to good looks, but there was nevertheless something frank and wholesome and sweet about her—something of the charm of a nice boy—that counterbalanced her undeniable plainness. As she had once told Diana: "I'm not beautiful, so I'm obliged to be good. You're not compelled by the same necessity, and I may yet see you sliding down the primrose path, whereas I shall inevitably end my days in the odour of sanctity—probably a parish worker to some celibate vicar!"

The Rector and Joan were half-way through their breakfast when a light step sounded in the hall outside, and a minute later the door flew open to admit Diana.

"Good morning, dear people," she exclaimed gaily. "Am I late? It looks like it from the devastated appearance of the bacon dish. Pobs, you've eaten all the breakfast!" And she dropped a light kiss on the top of the Rector's head. "Ugh! Your hair's all wet with sea-water. Why don't you dry yourself when you take a bath, Pobs dear? I'll come with you to-morrow—not to dry you, I mean, but just to bathe."

Stair surveyed her with a twinkle as he retrieved her plate of kidneys and bacon from the hearth where it had been set down to keep hot.

"Diana, I regret to observe that your conversation lacks the flavour of respectability demanded by your present circumstances," he remarked. "I fear you'll never be an ornament to any clerical household."

"No. *Pas mon métier.* Respectability isn't in the least a *sine qua non* for a prima donna—far from it!"

Stair chuckled.

"To hear you talk, no one would imagine that in reality you were the most conventional of prudes," he flung at her.

"Oh, but I'm growing out of it," she returned hopefully.

"Yesterday, for instance, I palled up with a perfectly strange young man. We conversed together as though we had known each other all our lives, shared the same table for dinner——"

"You didn't?" broke in Joan, a trifle shocked.

Diana nodded serenely.

"Indeed I did. And what was the reward of my misdeeds? Why, there he was at hand to save me when the smash came!"

"Who was he?" asked Joan curiously. "Any one from this part of the world?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," replied Diana. "I actually never inquired to whom I was indebted for my life and the various other trifles which he rescued for me from the wreck of our compartment. The only clue I have is the handkerchief he bound round my arm. It's very bluggy and it's marked M. E."

"M. E.," repeated the Rector. "Well, there must be plenty of M. E.'s in the world. Did he get out at Craiford?"

"He didn't," said Diana. "No; at present he is 'wropt in mist'ry,' but I feel sure we shall run up against each other again. I told him so."

"Did you, indeed?" Stair laughed. "And was he pleased at the prospect?"

"Well, frankly, Pobs, I can't say he seemed enraptured. On the contrary, he appeared to regard it in the light of a highly improbable and quite undesirable contingency."

"He must be lacking in appreciation," murmured Stair mockingly, pinching her cheek as he passed her on his way to select a pipe from the array that adorned the chimney-piece.

"Are you going 'parishing' this morning?" inquired Diana, as she watched him fill and light his pipe.

"Yes, I promised to visit Susan Gurney—she's laid up with rheumatism, poor old soul."

"Then I'll drive you, shall I? I suppose you've still got Tommy and the ralli-cart?"

"Yes," replied Stair gravely. "Notwithstanding diminishing tithes and increasing taxes, Tommy is still left to us. Apparently he thrives on a penurious diet, for he is fatter than ever."

Accordingly, half an hour later, the two set out behind the fat pony on a round of parochial visits. Underneath the seat of the trap reposed the numerous little packages of tea and tobacco with which the Rector, whose hand was always in his pocket, rarely omitted to season his visits to the sick among his parishioners.

"And why not?" he would say, when charged with pampering them by some starchy member of his congregation who considered that parochial visitation should be embellished solely by the delivery of appropriate tracts. "And why not pamper them a bit, poor souls? A pipe of baccy goes a long way towards taking your thoughts off a bad leg —as I found out for myself when I was laid up with an attack of the gout my maternal grandfather bequeathed me."

Whilst the Rector paid his visits, Diana waited outside the various cottages, driving the pony-trap slowly up and down the road, and stopping every now and again to exchange a few words with one or another of the village folk as they passed.

She was frankly delighted to be home again, and was experiencing that peculiar charm of the Devonshire village which lies in the fact that you may go away from it for several years and return to find it almost unchanged. In the wilds of Devon affairs move leisurely, and such changes as do occur creep in so gradually as to be almost imperceptible. No brand-new houses start into existence with lightning-like rapidity, for the all-sufficient reason that in such sparsely populated districts the enterprising builder would stand an excellent chance of having his attractive villa residences left empty on his hands. No; new houses are

built to order, if at all. In the same way, it is rare to find a fresh shop spring into being in a small village, and should it happen, in all probability a year or two will see the shutters up and the disgruntled proprietor departing in search of pastures new. For the villagers who have always dealt with the local butcher, baker, and grocer, and whose fathers have probably dealt with *their* fathers before them, are not easily to be cajoled into transferring their custom—and certainly not to the establishment of any one who has had the misfortune to be born outside the confines of the county, and is therefore to be briefly summed up in the one damning word "furriner." *

So that Diana, returning to Crailing for a brief holiday after a year's absence, found the tiny fishing village quite unchanged, and this fact imparted an air almost of unreality to the twelve busy, eventful months which had intervened. She felt as if she had never been away, as though the Diana Quentin who had been living in London and studying singing under the greatest master of the day were some one quite apart from the girl who had passed so many quiet, happy years at Crailing Rectory.

The new and unaccustomed student's life, the two golden visits which she had paid to Italy, the introduction into a milieu of clever, gifted people all struggling to make the most of their talents, had been such an immense change from the placid, humdrum existence which had preceded it, that it still held for her an almost dreamlike charm of novelty, and this was intensified at the present moment by her return to Crailing to find everything going on just in the same old way, precisely as though there had been no break at all.

As though to convince herself that the student life in London was a substantial reality, and not a mere figment of the imagination, she hummed a few bars of a song, and as she listened to the deep, rich notes of her voice, poised with that sureness which only comes of first-class training,

* *Anglice: foreigner.*

she smiled a little, reflecting that if nothing else had changed, here at least was a palpable outcome of that dreamlike year.

"Bravo!" The Rector's cheery tones broke in upon her thoughts as he came out from a neighbouring gateway and swung himself up into the trap beside her. "Di, I've got to hear that voice before long. What does Signor Baroni say about it?"

"Oh, I think he's quite pleased," she answered, whipping up the fat pony, who responded reluctantly. "But he's a fearful martinet. He nearly frightens me to death when he gets into one of his royal Italian rages—though he's always particularly sweet afterwards! Pobs, I wonder who my man in the train was?" she added inconsequently.

The Rector looked at her narrowly. He had wondered more than a little why the shock of the railway accident had apparently affected her so slightly, and although he had joked with Joan about some possible "gallant rescuer" who might have diverted her thoughts he had really attributed it partly to the youthful resiliency of Diana's nature, and partly to the fact that when one has narrowly escaped a serious injury, or death itself, the sense of relief is so intense as frequently to overpower for the moment every other feeling.

But now he was thrown back on the gallant rescuer theory; obviously the man, whoever he was, had impressed himself rather forcibly on Diana's mind, and the Rector acknowledged that this was almost inevitable from the circumstances in which they had been thrown together.

"You know," continued the girl, "I'm certain I've seen him before—the day I first went to Baroni to have my voice tested. It was in Grellingham Place, and all my songs blew away up the street, and I'm positive M. E. was the man who rescued them for me."

"Rescuing seems to be his hobby," commented the Rector dryly. "Did you remind him that you had met before?"

"Yes, and he wouldn't recollect it."

"Wouldn't?"

"No, wouldn't. I have a distinct feeling that he did remember all about it, and did recognise me again, but he wouldn't acknowledge it and politely assured me I must be mistaken."

The Rector smiled.

"Perhaps he has a prejudice against making the promiscuous acquaintance of beautiful young women in trains."

Diana sniffed.

"Oh, well, if he didn't think I was good enough to know——" She paused. "He *had* rather a superior way with him, a sort of independent, lordly manner, as though no one had a right to question anything he chose to do. And he was in a first-class reserved compartment too."

"Oh, was he? And did you force your way into his reserved compartment, may I ask?"

Diana giggled.

"I didn't force my way into it; I was pitchforked in by a porter. The train was packed, and I was late. Of course I offered to go and find another seat, but there wasn't one anywhere."

"So the young man yielded to *force majeure* and allowed you to travel with him?" said the Rector, adding seriously: "I'm very thankful he did. To think of you—alone—in that awful smash! . . . This morning's paper says there were forty people killed."

Diana gave a little nervous shiver, and then quite suddenly began to cry.

Stair quietly took the reins from her hand, and patted her shoulder, but he made no effort to check her tears. He had felt worried all morning by her curious detachment concerning the accident; it was unnatural, and he feared that later on the shock which she must have received might reveal itself in some abnormal nervousness regarding railway travelling. These tears would bring relief, and he welcomed them, allowing her to cry, comfortably leaning against his

shoulder, as the pony meandered up the hilly lane which led to the Rectory.

At the gates they both descended from the trap, and Stair was preparing to lead the pony into the stable-yard when Diana suddenly flung her arms round him, kissing him impulsively.

"Oh, Pobs, dear," she said half-laughing, half-crying. "You're such a darling—you always understand everything. I feel heaps better now, thank you."

CHAPTER V

THE SECOND MEETING

DIANA threw back the bedclothes and thrust an extremely pretty but reluctant foot over the edge of the bed. She did not experience in the least that sensation of exhilaration with which the idea of getting up invariably seems to inspire the heroine of a novel, prompting her to spring lightly from her couch and trip across to the window to see what sort of weather the author has provided. On the contrary, she was sorely tempted to snuggle down again amongst the pillows, but the knowledge that it wanted only half an hour to breakfast-time exercised a deterrent influence and she made her way with all haste to the bath-room, somewhat shamefully pleased to reflect that, being Easter Sunday, Pobs would be officiating at the early service, so that she would escape the long trudge down to the sea with him for their usual morning swim.

By the time she had bathed and dressed, however, she felt better able to face the day with a cheerful spirit, and the sun, streaming in through the diamond panes of her window, added a last vivifying touch and finally sent her downstairs on the best of terms with herself and the world at large.

There was no one about, as Joan had accompanied her father to church, so Diana sauntered out on to the flagged path and paced idly up and down, waiting for their return. The square, grey tower of the church, hardly more than a stone's throw distant from the Rectory, was visible through a gap in the trees where a short cut, known as the "church path" wound its way through the copse that hedged the garden. It

was an ancient little church, boasting a very beautiful thirteenth century window, which, in a Philistine past, had been built up and rough-cast outside, and had only been discovered in the course of some repairs that were being made to one of the walls. The inhabitants of Crailing were very proud of that thirteenth century window when it was disinterred; they had a proprietary feeling about it—since, after all, it had really belonged to them for a little matter of seven centuries or so, although they had been unaware of the fact.

Below the slope of the Rectory grounds the thatched roofs of the village bobbed into view, some gleaming golden in all the pride of recent thatching, others with their crown of straw mellowed by sun and rain to a deeper colour and patched with clumps of moss, vividly green as an emerald.

The village itself straggled down to the edge of the sea in untidy fashion, its cob-walled cottages in some places huddling together as though for company, in others standing far apart, with spaces of waste land between them where you might often see the women sitting mending the fishing nets and gossiping together as they worked.

Diana's eyes wandered affectionately over the picturesque little houses; she loved every quaint, thatched roof among them, but more than all she loved the glimpse of the sea that lay beyond them, pierced by the bold headland of red sandstone, Culver Point, which thrust itself into the blue of the water like an arm stretched out to shelter the little village nestling in its curve from the storms of the Atlantic.

Presently she heard the distant click of a gate, and very soon the Rector and Joan appeared, Stair with the dreaming, far-away expression in his eyes of one who has been communing with the saints.

Diana went to meet them and slipped her arm confidingly through his.

"Come back to earth, Pobs, dear," she coaxed gaily. "You look like Moses might have done when he descended from the Mount."

The glory faded slowly out of his eyes.

"Come back to heaven, Di," he retorted a little sadly. "That's where you came from, you know."

Diana shook her head.

"You did, I verily believe," she declared affectionately. "But there's only a very small slice of heaven in my composition, I'm afraid."

Stair looked down at her thoughtfully, at the clean line of the cheek curving into the pointed, determined little chin, at the sensitive, eager mouth, unconsciously sensuous in the lovely curve of its short upper-lip, at the ardent, glowing eyes—the whole face vital with the passionate demand of youth for the kingdoms of the earth.

"We've all got our share of heaven, my dear," he said at last, smiling a little. "But I'm thinking yours may need some hard chiselling of fate to bring it into prominence."

Diana wriggled her shoulders.

"It doesn't sound nice, Pobs. I don't in the least want to be chiselled into shape; it reminds one too much of the dentist."

"The gentleman who chisels out decay? You're exactly carrying out my metaphor to its bitter end," returned Stair composedly.

"Oh, Joan, do stop him," exclaimed Diana appealingly. "I'm going to church this morning, and if he lectures me like this I shall have no appetite left for spiritual things."

"I didn't know you ever had—much," replied Joan, laughing.

"Well, anyway, I've a thoroughly healthy appetite for my breakfast," said Diana, as they went into the dining-room. "I'm feeling particularly cheerful just this moment. I have a presentiment that something very delightful is going to happen to me to-day—though, to be sure, Sunday isn't usually a day when exciting things occur."

"Dreams generally go by contraries," observed Joan sagely. "And I rather think the same applies to presenti-

ments. I know that whenever I have felt a comfortable assurance that everything was going smoothly, it has generally been followed by one of the servants giving notice, or the bursting of the kitchen boiler, or something equally disagreeable."

Diana gurgled unfeelingly.

"Oh, those are merely the commonplaces of existence," she replied. "I was meaning"—waving her hand expansively—"big things."

"And when you've got your own house, my dear," retorted Joan, "you'll find those commonplaces of existence assume alarmingly big proportions."

Soon after Stair had finished his after-breakfast pipe, the chiming of the bells announced that it was time to prepare for church. The Rectory pew was situated close to the pulpit, at right angles to the body of the church, and Diana and Joan took their places one at either end of it. As the former was wont to remark: "It's such a comfort when there's no competition for the corner seats."

The organ had ceased playing, and the words *"Dearly beloved"* had already fallen from the Rector's lips, when the churchdoor opened once again to admit some late arrivals. Instinctively Diana looked up from her prayer-book, and, as her glance fell upon the newscomers, the pupils of her eyes dilated until they looked almost black, while a wave of colour rushed over her face, dyeing it scarlet from brow to throat.

Two ladies were coming up the aisle, the one bordering on middle age, the other young and of uncommon beauty, but it was upon neither of these that Diana's startled eyes were fixed. Behind them, and evidently of their party, came a tall, fair man whose supple length of limb and very blue eyes sent a little thrill of recognition through her veins.

It was her fellow-traveller of that memorable journey down from town!

She closed her eyes a moment. Once again she could hear the horrifying crash as the engine hurled itself against the truck that blocked the metals, feel the swift pall of darkness close about her, rife with a thousand terrors, and then, out of that hideous night, the grip of strong arms folded round her, and a voice, harsh with fear, beating against her ears: "Are you hurt? . . . My God, are you hurt?"

When she opened her eyes again, the little party of three had taken their places and were composedly following the service. Apparently he had not seen her, and Diana shrank a little closer into the friendly shadow of the pulpit, feeling for the moment an odd, nervous fear of encountering his eyes.

But she soon realised that she need not have been alarmed. He was evidently quite unaware of her proximity, for his glance never once strayed in her direction, and, gradually gaining courage as she appreciated this, Diana ventured to let her eyes turn frequently during the service towards the pew where the newcomers were sitting.

That they were strangers to the neighbourhood she was sure; she had certainly never seen either of the two women before. The elder of the two was a plump, round-faced little lady, with bright brown eyes, and pretty, crinkly brown hair lightly powdered with grey. She was very fashionably dressed, and the careful detail of her toilet pointed to no lack of means. The younger woman, too, was exquisitely turned out, but there was something so individual about her personality that it dominated everything else, relegating her clothes to a very secondary position. As in the case of an unusually beautiful gem, it was the jewel itself which impressed one, rather than the setting which framed it round.

She was very fair, with quantities of pale golden hair rather elaborately dressed, and her eyes were blue—not the keen, brilliant blue of those of the man beside her, but a soft blue-grey, like the sky on a misty summer's morning.

Her small, exquisite features were clean-cut as a cameo, and she carried herself with a little touch of hauteur—an air of aloofness, as it were. There was nothing ungracious about it, but it was unmistakably there—a slightly emphasised hint of personal dignity.

Diana regarded her with some perplexity; the girl's face was vaguely familiar to her, yet at the same time she felt perfectly certain that she had never seen her before. She wondered whether she were any relation to the man with her, but there was no particular resemblance between the two, except that both were fair and bore themselves with a certain subtle air of distinction that rather singled them out from amongst their fellows.

In repose, Diana noticed, the man's face was grave almost to sternness, and there was a slightly worn look about it as of one who had passed through some fiery discipline of experience and had forced himself to meet its demands. The lines around the mouth, and the firm closing of the lips, held a suggestion of suffering, but there was no rebellion in the face, rather a look of inflexible endurance.

Diana wondered what lay behind that curiously controlled expression, and the memory of certain words he had let fall during their journey together suddenly recurred to her with a new significance attached to them. . . . "Just as though we had any too many pleasures in life!" he had said. And again: "Oh, for that! If we could have what we wanted in this world! . . ."

Uttered in his light, half-bantering tones, the bitter flavour of the words had passed her by, but now, as she studied the rather stern set of his features, they returned to her with fresh meaning and she felt that their mocking philosophy was to a certain extent indicative of the man's attitude towards life.

So absorbed was she in her thoughts that the stir and rustle of the congregation issuing from their seats at the conclusion of the service came upon her in the light of a

surprise; she had not realised that the service—in which she had been taking a reprehensibly perfunctory part—had drawn to its close, and she almost jumped when Joan nudged her unobtrusively and whispered:—

"Come along. I believe you're half asleep."

She shook her head, smiling, and gathering up her gloves and prayer-book, she followed Joan down the aisle and out into the churchyard where people were standing about in little groups, exchanging the time of day with that air of a renewal of interest in worldly topics which synchronises with the end of Lent.

The Rector had not yet appeared, and as Joan was chatting with Mrs. Mowbray, the local doctor's wife, Diana, who had an intense dislike for Mrs. Mowbray and all her works—there were six of the latter, ranging from a lanky girl of twelve to a fat baby still in the perambulator stage—made her way out of the churchyard and stood waiting by the beautiful old lichgate, which, equally with the thirteenth century window, was a source of pride and satisfaction to the good folk of Crailing.

A big limousine had pulled up beside the footpath, and an immaculate footman was standing by its open door, rug in hand. Diana wondered idly whose car it could be, and it occurred to her that very probably it belonged to the strangers who had attended the service that morning.

A minute later her assumption was confirmed, as the middle-aged lady, followed by the young, pretty one, came quickly through the lichgate and entered the car. The footman hesitated, still holding the door open, and the elder lady leaned forward to say:—

"It's all right, Baker. Mr. Errington is walking back."

Errington! So that was his name—that was what the E. on the handkerchief stood for! Diana thought she could hazard a reasonable guess as to why he had elected to walk home. He must have caught sight of her in church after all, and it was but natural that, after the experience they

had passed through together, he should wish to renew his acquaintance with her. When two people have been as near to death in company as they had been, it can hardly be expected that they will regard each other in the light of total strangers should they chance to meet again.

Hidden from his sight by an intervening yew tree, she watched him coming down the church path, conscious of a somewhat pleasurable sense of anticipation, and when he had passed under the lichgate and, turning to the left, came face to face with her, she bowed and smiled, holding out her hand.

To her utter amazement he looked at her without the faintest sign of recognition on his face, pausing only for the fraction of a second as a man may when some stranger claims his acquaintance by mistake; then with a murmured "Pardon!" he raised his hat slightly and passed on.

Diana's hand dropped slowly to her side. She felt stunned. The thing seemed incredible. Less than a week ago she and this man had travelled companionably together in the train, dined at the same table, and together shared the same dreadful menace which had brought death very close to both of them, and now he passed her by with the cool stare of an utter stranger! If he had knocked her down she would hardly have been more astonished.

Moreover, it was not as though her companionship had been forced upon him in the train; he had deliberately sought it. Two people can travel side by side without advancing a single hairsbreadth towards acquaintance if they choose. But he had not so chosen—most assuredly he had not. He had quietly, with a charmingly persuasive insistence, broken through the conventions of custom, and had subsequently proved himself as considerate and as thoughtful for her comfort as any actual friend could have been. More than that, in those moments of tense excitement, immediately after the collision had occurred, she could have sworn that

real feeling, genuine concern for her safety, had vibrated in his voice.

And now, just as deliberately, just as composedly as he had begun the acquaintance, so he had closed it.

Diana's cheeks burned with shame. She felt humiliated. Evidently he had regarded her merely as some one with whom it might be agreeable to idle away the tedium of a journey—but that was all. It was obviously his intention that that should be the beginning and the end of it.

In a dream she crossed the road and, opening the gate that admitted to the "church path," made her way home alone. She felt she must have a few minutes to herself before she faced the Rector and Joan at the Rectory mid-day dinner. Fortunately, they were both in ignorance of this amazing, stupefying fact that her fellow-traveller—the "gallant rescuer" about whom Pobs had so joyously chaffed her—had signified in the most unmistakable fashion that he wanted nothing more to do with her, and by the time the dinner-bell sounded, Diana had herself well in hand—so well that she was even able to ask in tones of quite casual interest if any one knew who were the strangers in church that morning?

"Yes, Mowbray told me," replied the Rector. "They are the new people who have taken Red Gables—that pretty little place on the Woodway Road. The girl is Adrienne de Gervais, the actress, and the elderly lady is a Mrs. Adams, her chaperon."

"Oh, then that's why her face seemed so familiar!" exclaimed Diana, a light breaking in upon her. "I mean Miss de Gervais'—not the chaperon's. Of course I must have seen her picture in the illustrated papers dozens of times."

"And the man who was with them is Max Errington, who writes nearly all the plays in which she takes part," chimed in Joan. "He's supposed to be in love with her. *That* piece of information I acquired from Mrs. Mowbray."

"I detest Mrs. Mowbray," said Diana, with sudden viciousness. "She's the sort of person who has nothing whatever to talk about and spends hours doing it."

The others laughed.

"She's rather a gas-bag, I must admit," acknowledged Stair. "But, you know, a country doctor's wife is usually the emporium for all the local gossip. It's expected of her."

"Then I'm sure Mrs. Mowbray will never disappoint any one. She fully comes up to expectations," observed Diana grimly.

"I suppose we shall have to call on these new people at Red Gables, Dad?" asked Joan, after a brief interval.

Diana bent her head suddenly over her plate to hide the scarlet flush which flew into her cheeks at the suggestion. She would *not* call upon them—a thousand times no! Max Errington had shown her very distinctly in what estimation he held the honour of her friendship, and he should never have the chance of believing she had tried to thrust it on him.

"Well"—the Rector was replying leisurely to Joan's inquiry—"I understand they are only going to be at Red Gables now and then—when Miss de Gervais wants a rest from her professional work, I expect. But still, as they have come to our church and are strangers in the district, it would perhaps be neighbourly to call, wouldn't it?"

"Can't you call on them, Pobs?" suggested Diana. "A sort of 'rectorial' visit, you know. That would surely be sufficient."

The Rector hesitated.

"I don't know about that, Di. Don't you think it would look rather unfriendly on the part of you girls? Rather snubby, eh?"

That was precisely what Diana had thought, and the reflection had afforded her no small satisfaction. She wanted to hit back—and hit hard—and now Pobs' kindly,

hospitable nature was unconsciously putting the brake on the wheel of retribution.

She shrugged her shoulders with an air of indifference.

"Oh, well, you and Joan can call. I don't think actresses, and authors who love them and write plays for them, are much in my line," she replied distantly.

It would seem as though Joan's dictum that presentiments, like dreams, go by contraries, had been founded upon the rock of experience, for, in truth, Diana's premonition that something delightful was about to happen to her had been fulfilled in a sorry fashion.

CHAPTER VI

THE AFTERMATH OF AN ADVENTURE

DIANA awoke with a start. Before sleep had overtaken her she had been lying on a shallow slope of sand, leaning against a rock, with her elbow resting on its flat surface and her book propped up in front of her. Gradually the rhythmic rise and fall of the waves on the shore had lulled her into slumber—the *plop* as they broke in eddies of creaming foam, and then the sibilant *hush-sh-sh*—like a long-drawn sigh—as the water receded only to gather itself afresh into a crested billow.

Scarcely more than half awake she sat up and stared about her, dreamily wondering how she came to be there. She felt very stiff, and the arm on which she had been leaning ached horribly. She rubbed it a little, dully conscious of the pain, and as the blood began to course through the veins again, the sharp, pricking sensation commonly known as "pins and needles" aroused her effectually, and she recollected that she had walked out to Culver Point and established herself in one of the numerous little bays that fringed the foot of the great red cliff, intending to spend a pleasant afternoon in company with a new novel. And then the Dustman (idling about until his duties proper should commence in the evening) had come by and touched her eyelids and she had fallen fast asleep.

But she was thoroughly wide awake now, and she looked round her with a rather startled expression, realising that she must have slept for some considerable time, for the sun, which had been high in the heavens, had already dipped towards the horizon and was shedding a rosy track of light

across the surface of the water. The tide, too, had come up a long way since she had dozed off into slumber, and waves were now breaking only a few yards distant from her feet.

She cast a hasty glance to right and left, where the arms of the little cove stretched out to meet the sea, strewn with big boulders clothed in shell and seaweed. But there were no rocks to be seen. The grey water was lapping lazily against the surface of the cliff itself and she was cut off on either side.

For a minute or so her heart beat unpleasantly fast; then, with a quick sense of relief, she recollected that only at spring tides was the little bay where she stood entirely under water. There was no danger, she reflected, but nevertheless her position was decidedly unenviable. It was not yet high tide, so it would be some hours at least before she would be able to make her way home, and meanwhile the sun was sinking fast, it was growing unpleasantly cold, and she was decidedly hungry. In the course of another hour or two she would probably be hungrier still, but with no nearer prospect of dinner, while the Rector and Joan would be consumed with anxiety as to what had become of her.

Anxiously she scanned the sea, hoping she might sight some homing fishing-boat which she could hail, but no welcome red or brown sail broke the monotonous grey waste of water, and in hopes of warming herself a little she began to walk briskly up and down the little beach still keeping a sharp look-out at sea for any passing boat.

An interminable hour crawled by. The sun dipped a little lower, flinging long streamers of scarlet and gold across the sea. Far in the blue vault of the sky a single star twinkled into view, while a little sighing breeze arose and whispered of coming night.

Diana shivered in her thin blouse. She had brought no coat with her, and, now that the mist was rising, she felt chilled to the bone, and she heartily anathematised her carelessness for getting into such a scrape.

And then, all at once, across the water came the welcome sound of a human voice:—

"Ahoy! Ahoy there!"

A small brown boat and the figure of the man in it, resting on his oars, showed sharply etched against the background of the sunset sky.

Diana waved her handkerchief wildly and the man waved back, promptly setting the boat with her nose towards the shore and sculling with long, rhythmic strokes that speedily lessened the distance between him and the eager figure waiting at the water's edge.

As he drew nearer, Diana was struck by something oddly familiar in his appearance, and when he glanced back over his shoulder to gauge his distance from the shore, she recognised with a sudden shocked sense of dismay that the man in the boat was none other than Max Errington!

She retreated a few steps hastily, and stood waiting, tense with misery and discomfort. Had it still been possible she would have signalled to him to go on and leave her; the bare thought of being indebted to him—to this man who had coolly cut her in the street—for escape from her present predicament filled her with helpless rage.

But it was too late. Errington gave a final pull, shipped his oars, and, as the boat rode in on the top of a wave, leaped out on the shore and beached her safely. Then he turned and strode towards Diana, his face wearing just that same concerned, half-angry look that it had done when he found her, shortly after the railway collision, trying to help the woman who had lost her child.

"What in the name of heaven and earth are you doing here?" he demanded brusquely.

Apparently he had entirely forgotten the more recent episode of Easter Sunday and was prepared to scold her roundly, exactly as he had done on that same former occasion. The humour of the situation suddenly caught hold of

Diana, and for the moment she, too, forgot that she had reason to be bitterly offended with this man.

"Waiting for you to rescue me—as usual," she retorted frivolously. "You seem to be making quite a habit of it."

He smiled grimly.

"I'm making a virtue of necessity," he flung back at her. "What on earth do your people mean by letting you roam about by yourself like this? You're not fit to be alone! As though a railway accident weren't sufficient excitement for any average woman, you must needs try to drown yourself. Are you so particularly anxious to get quit of this world?"

"Drown myself?" she returned scornfully. "How could I—when the sea doesn't come up within a dozen yards of the cliff except at spring tide?"

"And I suppose it hadn't occurred to you that this *is* a spring tide?" he said drily. "In another hour or so there'll be six feet of water where we're standing now."

The abrupt realisation that once again she had escaped death by so narrow a margin shook her for a moment, and she swayed a little where she stood, while her face went suddenly very white.

In an instant his arm was round her, supporting her. "I oughtn't to have told you," he said hastily. "Forgive me. You're tired—and, merciful heavens! child, you're half-frozen. Your teeth are chattering with cold."

He stripped off his coat and made as though to help her on with it.

"No—no," she protested. "I shall be quite warm directly. Please put on your coat again."

He shook his head, smiling down at her, and taking first one of her arms, and then the other, he thrust them into the empty sleeves, putting the coat on her as one would dress a child.

"I'm used to having my own way," he observed coolly, as he proceeded to button it round her.

"But you?——" she faltered, looking at the thin silk of his shirt.

"I'm not a lady with a beautiful voice that must be taken care of. What would Signor Baroni say to this afternoon's exploit?"

"Oh, then you haven't forgotten?" Diana asked curiously.

The intensely blue eyes swept over her face.

"No," he replied shortly, "I haven't forgotten."

In silence he helped her into the boat, and she sat quietly in the stern as he bent to his oars and sent the little skiff speeding homewards towards the harbour.

She felt strangely content. The fact that he had deliberately refused to recognise her seemed a matter of very small moment now that he had spoken to her again—scolding her and enforcing her obedience to his wishes in that oddly masterful way of his, which yet had something of a possessive tenderness about it that appealed irresistibly to the woman in her.

Arrived at the quay of the little harbour, he helped her up the steps, slimy with weed and worn by the ceaseless lapping of the water, and the firm clasp of his hand on hers conveyed a curious sense of security, extending beyond just the mere safety of the moment. She had a feeling that there was something immutably strong and sure about this man—a calm, steadfast self-reliance to which one could unhesitatingly trust.

His voice broke in abruptly on her thoughts.

"My car's waiting at the quayside," he said. "I shall drive you back to the Rectory."

Diana assented—not, as she thought to herself with a somewhat wry smile, that it would have made the very slightest difference had she refused point-blank. Since he had decided that she was to travel in his car, travel in it she would, willy-nilly. But as a matter of fact, she was so tired that she was only too thankful to sink back on to the soft, luxurious cushions of the big limousine.

Errington tucked the rugs carefully round her, substituting one of them for the coat she was wearing, spoke a few words to the chauffeur, and then seated himself opposite her.

Diana thought the car seemed to be travelling rather slowly as it began the steep ascent from the harbour to the Rectory. Possibly the chauffeur who had taken his master's instructions might have thrown some light on the subject had he so chosen.

"Quite warm now?" queried Errington.

Diana snuggled luxuriously into her corner.

"Quite, thanks," she replied. "You're rapidly qualifying as a good Samaritan *par excellence,* thanks to the constant opportunities I afford you."

He laughed shortly and relapsed into silence, leaning his elbow on the cushioned ledge beside him and shading his face with his hand. Beneath its shelter, the keen blue eyes stared at the girl opposite with an odd, thwarted expression in their depths.

Presently Diana spoke again, a tinge of irony in her tones.

"And—after this—when next we meet . . . are you going to cut me again? . . . It must have been very tiresome for you that an unkind fate insisted on your making my closer acquaintance."

He dropped his hand suddenly.

"Oh, forgive me!" he exclaimed, with a quick gesture of deprecation. "It—it was unpardonable of me . . ." His voice vibrated with some strong emotion, and Diana regarded him curiously.

"Then you meant it?" she said slowly. "It was deliberate?"

He bent his head affirmatively.

"Yes," he replied. "I suppose you think it unforgivable. And yet—and yet it would have been better so."

"Better? But why? I'm generally"—dimpling a little—"considered rather nice."

"'Rather nice'?" he repeated in a peculiar tone. "Oh, yes—that does not surprise me."

"And some day," she continued gaily, "although I'm nobody just now, I may become a really famous person—and then you might be quite happy to know me!"

Her eyes danced with mirth as she rallied him.

He looked at her strangely.

"No—it can never bring me happiness. . . . *Ah, mais jamais!*" he added, with sudden passion.

Diana was startled.

"It—it was horrid of you to cut me," she said in a troubled voice.

"My punishment lies in your hands," he returned. "When I leave you at the Rectory—after to-day—you can end our acquaintance if you choose. And I suppose—you *will* choose. It would be contrary to human nature to throw away such an excellent opportunity for retaliation—feminine human nature, anyway."

He spoke with a kind of half-savage raillery, and Diana winced under it. His moods changed so rapidly that she was bewildered. At one moment there would be an exquisite gentleness in his manner when he spoke to her, at the next a contemptuous irony that cut like a whip.

"Would it be—a punishment?" she asked at last.

He checked a sudden movement towards her.

"What do you suppose?" he said quietly.

"I don't know what to think. If it would be a punishment, why were you so anxious to take it out of my hands? It was you who ended our acquaintance on Sunday, remember."

"Yes, I know. Twice I've closed the door between us, and twice fate has seen fit to open it again."

"Twice? . . . Then—then it *was* you—in Grellingham Place that day?"

"Yes," he acknowledged simply.

Diana bent her head to hide the small, secret smile that curved her lips.

At last, after a pause—

"But why—why do you not want to know me?" she asked wonderingly.

"Not want to?" he muttered below his breath. "God in heaven! *Not want to!*" His hand moved restlessly. After a minute he answered her, speaking very gently.

"Because I think you were born to stand in the sunshine. Some of us stand always in the shadow; it creeps about our feet, following us wherever we go. And I would not darken the sunlit places of your life with the shadow that clings to mine."

There was an undercurrent of deep sadness in his tones.

"Can't you—can't you banish the shadow?" faltered Diana. A sense of tragedy oppressed her. "Life is surely made for happiness," she added, a little wistfully.

"Your life, I hope." He smiled across at her. "So don't let us talk any more about the shadow. Only"—gently—"if I came nearer to you—the shadow might engulf you, too." He paused, then continued more lightly: "But if you'll forgive my barbarous incivility of Sunday, perhaps—perhaps I may be allowed to stand just on the outskirts of your life—watch you pass by on your road to fame, and toss a flower at your feet when all the world and his wife are crowding to hear the new *prima donna.*" He had dropped back into the vein of light, ironical mockery which Diana was learning to recognise as characteristic of the man. It was like the rapier play of a skilled duellist, his weapon flashing hither and thither, parrying every thrust of his opponent, and with consummate ease keeping him ever at a distance.

"I wonder"—he regarded her with an expression of amused curiosity—"I wonder whether you would stoop to pick up my flower if I threw one? But, no"—he answered his own question hastily, giving her no time to reply—

"you would push it contemptuously aside with the point of your little white slipper, and say to your crowd of admirers standing around you: 'That flower is the gift of a man—a rough boor of a man—who was atrociously rude to me once. I don't even value it enough to pick it up.' Whereupon every one—quite rightly, too!—would cry shame on the man who had dared to insult so charming a lady—probably adding that if bad luck befell him it would be no more than he deserved! . . . And I've no doubt he'll get his deserts," he added carelessly.

Diana felt the tears very near her eyes and her lip quivered. This man had the power of hurting her—wounding her to the quick—with his bitter raillery.

When she spoke again her voice shook a little.

"You are wrong," she said, "quite wrong. I should pick up the flower and"—steadily—"I should keep it, because it was thrown to me by a man who had twice done me the greatest service in his power."

Once again he checked, as if by sheer force of will, a sudden eager movement towards her.

"Would you?" he said quickly. "Would you do that? But you would be mistaken; I should be gaining your kindness under false pretences. The greatest service in my power would be for me to go away and never see you again. . . . And I can't do that—now," he added, his voice vibrating oddly.

His eyes held her, and at the sound of that sudden note of passion in his tone she felt some new, indefinable emotion stir within her that was half pain, half pleasure. Her eyelids closed, and she stretched out her hands a little gropingly, almost as if she were trying to ward away something that threatened her.

There was appeal in the gesture—a pathetic, half-childish appeal, as though the shy, virginal youth of her sensed the distant tumult of awakening passion and would fain delay its coming.

She was just a frank, whole-hearted girl, knowing nothing of love and its strange, inevitable claim, but deep within her spoke that instinct, premonition—call it what you will—which seems in some mysterious way to warn every woman when the great miracle of love is drawing near. It is as though Love's shadow fell across her heart and she were afraid to turn and face him—shrinking with the terror of a trapped wild thing from meeting his imperious demand.

Errington, watching her, saw the childish gesture, the quiver of her mouth, the soft fall of the shadowed lids, and with a swift, impetuous movement he leaned forward and caught her by the arms, pulling her towards him. Instinctively she resisted, struggling in his grip, her eyes, wide and startled, gazing into his.

"Diana!"

The word seemed wrung from him, and as though something within her answered to its note of urgency, she suddenly yielded, stumbling forward on to her knees. His arms closed round her, holding her as in a vice, and she lay there, helpless in his grasp, her head thrown back a little, her young, slight breast fluttering beneath the thin silk of her blouse.

For a moment he held her so, staring down at her, his breath hard-drawn between his teeth; then swiftly, with a stifled exclamation he stooped his head, kissing her savagely, bruising, crushing her lips beneath his own.

She felt her strength going from her—it seemed as though he were drawing her soul out from her body—and then, just as sheer consciousness itself was wavering, he took his mouth from hers, and she could see his face, white and strained, bent above her.

She leaned away from him, panting a little, her shoulders against the side of the car.

"God!" she heard him mutter.

For a space the throb of the motor was the only sound that broke the stillness, but presently, after what seemed

an eternity, he raised her from the floor, where she still knelt inertly, and set her on the seat again. She submitted passively.

When he had resumed his place, he spoke in dry, level tones.

"I suppose I'm damned beyond forgiveness after this?"

She made no answer. She was listening with a curious fascination to the throb of her heart and the measured beat of the engine; the two seemed to meet and mingle into one great pulse, thundering against her tired brain.

"Diana"—he spoke again, still in the same toneless voice —"am I to be forbidden even the outskirts of your life now?"

She moved her head restlessly.

"I don't know—oh, I don't know," she whispered.

She was utterly spent and exhausted. Unconsciously every nerve in her had responded to the fierce passion of that suffocating kiss, and now that the tense moment was over she felt drained of all vitality. Her head drooped listlessly against the cushions of the car and dark shadows stained her cheeks beneath the wide-opened eyes—eyes that held the startled, frightened expression of one who has heard for the first time the beat of Passion's wings.

Gradually, as Errington watched her, the strained look left his face and was replaced by one of infinite solicitude. She looked so young as she lay there, huddled against the cushions—hardly more than a child—and he knew what that mad moment had done for her. It had wakened the woman within her. He cursed himself softly.

"Diana," he said, leaning forward. "For God's sake, say you forgive me, child."

The deep pain in his voice pierced through her dulled senses.

"Why—why did you do it?" she asked tremulously.

"I did it—oh, because for the moment I forgot that I'm a man barred out from all that makes life worth living!

. . . I forgot about the shadow, Diana. . . . You—made me forget."

He spoke with concentrated bitterness, adding mockingly:—

"After all, there's a great deal to be said in favour of the Turkish yashmak. It at least removes temptation."

Diana's hand flew to her lips—they burned still at the memory of those kisses—and he smiled ironically at the instinctive gesture.

"I hate you!" she said suddenly.

"Quite the most suitable thing you could do," he answered composedly. All the softened feeling of a few moments ago had vanished: he seemed to have relapsed into his usual sardonic humour, putting a barrier between himself and her that set them miles apart.

Diana was conscious of a fury of resentment against his calm readjustment of the situation. He was the offender; it was for her to dictate the terms of peace, and he had suddenly cut the ground from under her feet. Her pride rose in arms. If he could so contemptuously sweep aside the memory of the last ten minutes, careless whether his plea for forgiveness were granted or no, she would show him that for her, too, the incident was closed. But she would not forgive him—ever.

She opened her campaign at once.

"Surely we must be almost at the Rectory by now?" she began in politely conventional tones.

A sudden gleam of wicked mirth flashed across his face.

"Has the time, then, seemed so long?" he demanded coolly.

Diana's lips trembled in the vain effort to repress a smile. The man was impossible! It was also very difficult, she found, to remain righteously angry with such an impossible person.

If he saw the smile, he gave no indication of it. Rubbing the window with his hand he peered out.

"I think we are just turning in at the Rectory gates," he remarked carelessly.

In another minute the motor had throbbed to a standstill and the chauffeur was standing at the open door.

"I'm sorry we've been so long coming, sir," he said, touching his hat. "I took a wrong turning—lost me way a bit."

Then, as Errington and Diana passed into the house, he added thoughtfully, addressing his engine:—

"She's a pretty little bit of skirt and no mistake. I wonder, now, if we was lost long enough, eh, Billy?"

CHAPTER VII

DIANA SINGS

"I FEEL that we are very much indebted to you, Mr. Errington," said Stair, when he and Joan had listened to an account of the afternoon's proceedings—the major portion of them, that is. Certain details were not included in the veracious history. "You seem to have a happy knack of turning up just at the moment you are most needed," he added pleasantly.

"I think I must plead indebtedness to Miss Quentin for allowing me such unique opportunities of playing knight errant," replied Max, smiling. "Such chances are rare in this twentieth century of ours, and Miss Quentin always kindly arranges so that I run no serious risks—to life and limb, at least," he added, his mocking eyes challenging Diana's.

She flushed indignantly. Evidently he wished her to understand that that breathless moment in the car counted for nothing—must not be taken seriously. He had only been amusing himself with her—just as he had amused himself by chatting in the train—and again a wave of resentment against him, against the cool, dominating insolence of the man, surged through her.

"I hope you'll stay and join us at dinner," the Rector was saying—"unless it's hopelessly spoilt by waiting so long. Is it, Joan?"

"Oh, no. I think there'll be some surviving remnants," she assured him.

"Then if you'll overlook any discrepancies," pursued Stair, smiling at Errington, "do stay."

"Say, rather, if you'll overlook discrepancies," answered Errington, smiling back—there was something infectious about Stair's geniality. "I'm afraid a boiled shirt is out of the question—unless I go home to fetch it!"

Diana stared at him. Was he really going to stay—to accept the invitation—after all that had occurred? If he did, she thought scornfully, it was only in keeping with that calm arrogance of his by which he allocated to himself the right to do precisely as he chose, irrespective of convention—or of other people's feelings.

Meanwhile Stair was twinkling humorously across at his visitor.

"If you can bear to eat your dinner without being encased in the regulation starch," he said, "I don't think I should advise risking what remains of it by any further delay."

"Then I accept with pleasure," replied Errington.

As he spoke, his eyes sought Diana's once again. It almost seemed as though they pleaded with her for understanding. The half-sad, half-bitter mouth smiled faintly, the smile accentuating that upward curve at the corners of the lips which lent such an unexpected sweetness to its stern lines.

Diana looked away quickly, refusing to endorse the Rector's invitation, and, escaping to her own room, she made a hasty toilet, slipping into a simple little black gown open at the throat. Meanwhile, she tortured herself with questioning as to why—if all that had passed meant nothing to him—he had chosen to stay. Once she hid her burning face in her hands as the memory of those kisses rushed over her afresh, sending little, new, delicious thrills coursing through her veins. Then once more the maddening doubt assailed her—were they but a bitter humiliation which she would remember for the rest of her life?

When she came downstairs again, Max Errington and Stair were conversing happily together, evidently on the

best of terms with themselves and each other. Errington was speaking as she entered the room, but he stopped abruptly, biting his words off short, while his keen eyes swept over the slim, black-gowned figure hesitating in the doorway.

"Mr. Stair has been pledging your word during your absence," he said. "He has promised that you'll sing to us after dinner."

"I? Oh"—nervously—"I don't think I want to sing this evening."

"Why not? Have the"—he made an infinitesimal pause, regarding her the while with quizzical eyes—"events of the afternoon robbed you of your voice?"

Diana gave him back his look defiantly. How dared he—oh, how dared he?—she thought indignantly.

"My adventures weren't serious enough for that," she replied composedly.

The ghost of a smile flickered across his face.

"Then you will sing?" he persisted.

"Yes, if you like."

He nodded contentedly, and as they went in to dinner he whispered:—

"I found the adventure—rather serious."

Dinner passed pleasantly enough. Errington and Stair contributed most of the conversation, the former proving himself a charming guest, and it was evident that the two men had taken a great liking to each other. It would have been a difficult subject indeed who did not feel attracted by Alan Stair; he was so unconventionally frank and sincere, brimming over with humour, and he regarded every man as his friend until he had proved him otherwise—and even then he was disposed to think that the fault must lie somewhere in himself.

"I'm not surprised that your church was so full on Sunday," Errington told him, "now that I've met you. If the Church of England clergy, as a whole, were as human as

you are, you would have fewer offshoots from your Established Church. I always think"—reminiscently—"that that is where the strength of the Roman Catholic *padre* lies—in his intense *humanness.*"

The Rector looked up in surprise.

"Then you're not a member of our Church?" he asked.

For a moment Errington looked embarrassed, as though he had said more than he wished to.

"Oh, I was merely comparing the two," he replied evasively. "I have lived abroad a good bit, you know."

"Ah! That explains it, then," said Stair. "You've caught some little foreign turns of speech. Several times I've wondered if you were entirely English."

Errington's face, as he turned to reply, wore that politely blank expression which Diana had encountered more than once when conversing with him—always should she chance to touch on any subject the natural answer to which might have revealed something of the man's private life.

"Oh," he answered the Rector lightly, "I believe there's a dash of foreign blood in my veins, but I've a right to call myself an Englishman."

After dinner, while the two men had their smoke, Diana, heedless of Joan's common-sense remonstrance on the score of dew-drenched grass, flung on a cloak and wandered restlessly out into the moonlit garden. She felt that it would be an utter impossibility to sit still, waiting until the men came into the drawing-room, and she paced slowly backwards and forwards across the lawn, a slight, shadowy figure in the patch of silver light.

Presently she saw the French window of the dining-room open, and Max Errington step across the threshold and come swiftly over the lawn towards her.

"I see you are bent on courting rheumatic fever—to say nothing of a sore throat," he said quietly, "and I've come to take you indoors."

Diana was instantly filled with a perverse desire to remain where she was.

"I'm not in the least cold, thank you," she replied stiffly. "And—I like it out here."

"You may not be cold," he returned composedly. "But I'm quite sure your feet are damp. Come along."

He put his arm under hers, impelling her gently in the direction of the house, and, rather to her own surprise, she found herself accompanying him without further opposition.

Arrived at the house, he knelt down and, taking up her foot in his hand, deliberately removed the little pointed slipper.

"There," he said conclusively, exhibiting its sole, dank with dew. "Go up and put on a pair of dry shoes and then come down and sing to me."

And once again she found herself meekly obeying him.

By the time she had returned to the drawing-room, Pobs and Errington were choosing the songs they wanted her to sing, while Joan was laughingly protesting that they had selected all those with the most difficult accompaniments.

"However, I'll do my best, Di," she added, as she seated herself at the piano.

Joan's "best" as a pianist did not amount to very much at any time, and she altogether lacked that intuitive understanding and sympathy which is the *sine qua non* of a good accompanist. Diana, accustomed to the trained perfection of Olga Lermontof, found herself considerably handicapped, and her rendering of the song in question, Saint-Saens' *Amour, viens aider,* left a good deal to be desired in consequence—a fact of which no one was more conscious than she herself.

But the voice! As the full rich notes hung on the air, vibrant with that indescribably thrilling quality which seems the prerogative of the contralto, Errington recognised at once that here was a singer destined to make her mark. The slight surprise which he had evinced on first learning

that she was a pupil of the great Baroni vanished instantly. No master could be better fitted to have the handling of such a voice—and certainly, he added mentally, Joan Stair was a ludicrously inadequate accompanist, only to be excused by her frank acknowledgment of the fact.

"I'm dreadfully sorry, Di," she said at the conclusion of the song. "But I really can't manage the accompaniment."

Errington rose and crossed the room to the piano.

"Will you allow me to take your place?" he said pleasantly. "That is, if Miss Quentin permits? It is hard lines to be suddenly called upon to read accompaniments if you are not accustomed to it."

"Oh, do you play?" exclaimed Joan, vacating her seat gladly. "Then please do. I feel as if I were committing murder when I stumble through Diana's songs."

She joined the Rector at the far end of the room, adding with a smile:—

"I make a much better audience than performer."

"What shall it be?" said Errington, turning over the pile of songs.

"What you like," returned Diana indifferently. She was rather pale, and her hand shook a little as she fidgeted restlessly with a sheet of music. It almost seemed as though the projected change of accompanist were distasteful to her.

Max laid his own hand over hers an instant.

"Please let me play for you," he said simply.

There was a note of appeal in his voice—rather as if he were seeking to soften her resentment against him, and would regard the permission to accompany her as a token of forgiveness. She met his glance, wavered a moment, then bent her head in silence, and each of them was conscious that in some mysterious way, without the interchange of further words, an armistice had been declared between them.

With Errington at the piano the music took on a different aspect. He was an incomparable accompanist, and

Diana, feeling herself supported and upborne, sang with a beauty of interpretation, an intensity of feeling, that had been impossible before. And through it all she was acutely conscious of Max Errington's proximity—knew instinctively that the passion of the song was shaking him equally with herself. It was as though some intangible live wire were stretched between them so that each could sense the emotion of the other—as though the garment with which we so persistently conceal our souls from one another's eyes were suddenly stripped away.

There was a tense look in Max's face as the last note trembled into silence, and Diana, meeting his glance, flushed rosily.

"I can't sing any more," she said, her voice uneven.

"No."

He added nothing to the laconic negative, but his eyes held hers remorselessly.

Then Pobs' cheerful tones fell on their ears and the taut moment passed.

"Di, you amazing child!" he exclaimed delightfully. "Where did you find a voice like that? I realise now that we've been entertaining genius unawares all this time. Joan, my dear, henceforth two commonplace bodies like you and me must resign ourselves to taking a back seat."

"I don't mind," returned Joan philosophically. "I think I was born with a humdrum nature; a quiet life was always my idea of bliss."

"Sing something else, Di," begged Stair. But Diana shook her head.

"I'm too tired, Pobs," she said quietly. Turning abruptly to Errington she continued: "Will you play instead?"

Max hesitated a moment, then resumed his place at the piano, and, after a pause, the three grave notes with which Rachmaninoff's wonderful "Prelude" opens, broke the silence.

It was speedily evident that Errington was a musician

of no mean order; indeed many a professional reputation has been based on a less solid foundation. The Rachmaninoff was followed by Chopin, Tchaikowsky, Debussy, and others of the modern school, and when finally he dropped his hands from the piano, laughingly declaring that he must be thinking of taking his departure before he played them all to sleep, Joan burst out bluntly:—

"We understood you were a dramatist, Mr. Errington. It seems to me you have missed your vocation."

Every one laughed.

"Rather a two-edged compliment, I'm afraid, Joan," chuckled Stair delightfully.

Joan blushed, overcome with confusion, and remained depressed until Errington, on the point of leaving, reassured her good-humouredly.

"Don't brood over your father's unkind references to two-edged compliments, Miss Stair. I entirely decline to see any but one meaning to your speech—and that a very pleasant one."

He shook hands with the Rector and Diana, holding the latter's hand an instant longer than was absolutely necessary, to ask, rather low:—

"Is it peace, then?"

But the softening spell of the music was broken, and Diana felt her resentment against him rise up anew.

Silently she withdrew her hand, refusing him an answer, defying him with a courage born of the near neighbourhood of the Rector and Joan, and a few minutes later the hum of his motor could be heard as it sped away down the drive.

Diana lay long awake that night, her thoughts centred round the man who had come so strangely into her life. It was as though he had been forced thither by a resistless fate which there was no eluding—for, on his own confession, he had deliberately sought to avoid meeting her again.

His whole attitude was utterly incomprehensible—a study of violently opposing contrasts. Diana felt bruised and

shaken by the fierce contradictions of his moods, the temperamental heat and ice which he had meted out to her. It seemed as if he were fighting against the attraction she had for him, prepared to contest every inch of ground—discounting each look and word wrung from him in some moment of emotion by the mocking raillery with which he followed it up.

More than once he had hinted at some barrier, spoken of a shadow that dogged his steps, as if complete freedom of action were denied him. Could it be—was it conceivable, that he was already married? And at the thought Diana hid hot cheeks against her pillow, living over again that moment in the car—that moment which had suddenly called into being emotions before whose overmastering possibilities she trembled.

At length, mentally and physically weary, she dropped into an uneasy slumber, vaguely wondering what the morrow would bring forth.

It brought the unexpected news that the occupants of Red Gables had suddenly left for London by the morning train.

CHAPTER VIII

MRS. LAWRENCE'S HOSPITALITY

"AN Officer's Widow offers hospitality to students and professional women. Excellent cuisine; man-servant; moderate terms. Apply: Mrs. L., 24 Brutton Square, N. W."

So ran the advertisement which Mrs. Lawrence periodically inserted in one of the leading London dailies. She was well-pleased with the wording of it, considering that it combined both veracity and attractiveness—two things which do not invariably run smoothly in conjunction with each other.

The opening phrase had reference to the fact that her husband, the defunct major, had been an army doctor, and the word hospitality pleasantly suggested the idea of a home from home, whilst the afterthought conveyed by the moderate terms delicately indicated that the hospitality was not entirely of a gratuitous nature. The man-servant, on closer inspection, resolved himself into a French-Swiss waiter, whose agility and condition were such that he could negotiate the whole ninety stairs of the house, three at a time, without once pausing for breath till he reached the top.

Little Miss Bunting, the lady-help, who lived with Mrs. Lawrence on the understanding that she gave "assistance in light household duties in return for hospitality," was not quite so nimble as Henri, the waiter, and often found her heart beating quite uncomfortably fast by the time she had climbed the ninety stairs to the little cupboard of a room which Mrs. Lawrence's conception of hospitality allotted for her use. She did the work of two servants and ate

rather less than one, and, seeing that she received no wages and was incurably conscientious, Mrs. Lawrence found the arrangement eminently satisfactory. Possibly Miss Bunting herself regarded the matter with somewhat less enthusiasm, but she was a plucky little person and made no complaint. As she wrote to her invalid mother, shortly after taking up her duties at Brutton Square: "After all, dearest of little mothers, I have a roof over my head and food to eat, and I'm not costing you anything except a few pounds for my clothes. And perhaps when I leave here, if Mrs. Lawrence gives me a good reference, I shall be able to get a situation with a salary attached to it."

So Miss Bunting stuck to her guns and spent her days in supplementing the deficiencies of careless servants, smoothing the path of the boarders, and generally enabling Mrs. Lawrence to devote much more time to what she termed her "social life" than would otherwise have been the case.

The boarders usually numbered anything from twelve to fifteen—all of the gentler sex—and were composed chiefly of students at one or other of the London schools of art or music, together with a sprinkling of visiting teachers of various kinds, and one or two young professional musicians whose earnings did not yet warrant their launching out into the independence of flat life. This meant that three times a year, when the schools closed for their regular vacations, a general exodus took place from 24 Brutton Square, and Mrs. Lawrence was happily enabled to go away and visit her friends, leaving the conscientious Miss Bunting to look after the reduced establishment and cater for the one or two remaining boarders who were not released by regular holidays. It was an admirable arrangement, profitable without being too exigeant.

At the end of each vacation Mrs. Lawrence always summoned Miss Bunting to her presence and ran through the list of boarders for the coming term, noting their various requirements. She was thus occupied one afternoon towards

the end of April. The spring sunshine poured in through the windows, lending an added cheerfulness of aspect to the rooms of the tall London house that made them appear worth quite five shillings a week more than was actually charged for them, and Mrs. Lawrence smiled, well satisfied.

She was a handsome woman, still in the early forties, and the word "stylish" inevitably leaped to one's mind at the sight of her full, well-corseted figure, fashionable raiment, and carefully coiffured hair. There was nothing whatever of the boarding-house keeper about her; in fact, at first sight, she rather gave the impression of a pleasant, sociable woman who, having a house somewhat larger than she needed for her own requirements, accepted a few paying guests to keep the rooms aired.

This was just the impression she wished to convey, and it was usually some considerable time before her boarders grasped the fact that they were dealing with a thoroughly shrewd, calculating business woman, who was bent on making every penny out of them that she could, compatibly with running the house on such lines as would ensure its answering to the advertised description.

"I'm glad it's a sunny day," she remarked to Miss Bunting. "First impressions are everything, and that pupil of Signor Baroni's, Miss Quentin, arrives to-day. I hope her rooms are quite ready?"

"Quite, Mrs. Lawrence," replied the lady-help. "I put a few flowers in the vases just to make it look a little home-like."

"Very thoughtful of you, Miss Bunting," Mrs. Lawrence returned graciously. "Miss Quentin's is rather a special case. To begin with, she has engaged a private sitting-room, and in addition to that she was recommended to come here by Signor Baroni himself."

The good word of a teacher of such standing as Baroni was a matter of the first importance to a lady offering a home from home to musical students, though possibly had

Mrs. Lawrence heard the exact form taken by Baroni's recommendation she might have felt less elated.

"The Lawrence woman is a bit of a shark, my dear," he had told Diana, when she had explained that, owing to the retirement from business of her former landlady, she would be compelled after Easter to seek fresh rooms. "But she caters specially for musical students, and as she is therefore obliged to keep the schools pleased, she feeds her boarders, on the whole, better than do most of her species. And remember, my dear Mees Quentin, that good food, and plenty of good food, means—voice."

So Diana had nodded and written to Mrs. Lawrence to ask if a bed-room and sitting-room opening one into the other could be at her disposal, receiving an affirmative reply.

"Regarding coals, Miss Bunting," proceeded Mrs. Lawrence thoughtfully, "I told Miss Quentin that the charge would be sixpence per scuttle." (This was in pre-war times, it must be remembered, and the scuttles were of painfully meagre proportions.) "It might be as well to put that *large* coal-box in her room—you know the one I mean—and make the charge eightpence."

The box in question was certainly of imposing exterior proportions, but its tin lining was of a quite different domestic period and made no pretensions as to fitting. It lay loosely inside its sham mahogany casing like the shrivelled kernel of a nut in its shell.

"The big coal-scuttle really doesn't hold twopennyworth more coal than the others," observed Miss Bunting tentatively.

A dull flush mounted to Mrs. Lawrence's cheek. She liked the prospect of screwing an extra twopence out of one of her boarders, but she hated having the fact so clearly pointed out to her. There were times when she found Miss Bunting's conscientiousness something of a trial.

"It's a much larger box," she protested sharply.

"Yes. I know it is—outside. But the lining only holds two more knobs than the sixpenny ones."

Mrs. Lawrence frowned.

"Do I understand that you—you actually measured the amount it contains?" she asked, with bitterness.

"Yes," retorted Miss Bunting valiantly. "And compared it with the others. It was when you told me to put the eightpenny scuttle in Miss Jenkins' room. She complained at once."

"Then you exceeded your duties, Miss Bunting. You should have referred Miss Jenkins to me."

Miss Bunting made no reply. She *had* acted precisely in the way suggested, but Miss Jenkins, a young art-student of independent opinions, had flatly declined to be "referred" to Mrs. Lawrence.

"It's not the least use, Bunty dear," she had said. "I'm not going to have half an hour's acrimonious conversation with Mrs. Lawrence on the subject of twopennyworth of coal. At the same time I haven't the remotest intention of paying twopence extra for those two lumps of excess luggage, so to speak. So you can just trot that sarcophagus away, like the darling you are, and bring me back my sixpenny scuttle again."

And little Miss Bunting, in her capacity of buffer state between Mrs. Lawrence and her boarders, had obeyed and said nothing more about the matter.

"I have to go out now," continued Mrs. Lawrence, after a pause pregnant with rebuke. "You will receive Miss Quentin on her arrival and attend to her comfort. And put the large coal-box in her sitting-room as I directed," she added firmly.

So it came about that when, half an hour later, a taxi-cab buzzed up to the door of No. 24, with Diana and a large quantity of luggage on board, the former found herself met in the hall by a cheerful little person with pretty brown eyes and a friendly smile to whom she took an instant liking.

Miss Bunting escorted Diana up to her rooms on the second floor, while Henri brought up the rear, staggering manfully beneath the weight of Miss Quentin's trunk.

A cheerful fire was blazing in the grate, and that, together with the daffodils that gleamed from a bowl on the table like a splash of gold, gave the room a pleasant and welcoming appearance.

"But, surely," said Diana hesitatingly, "you are not Mrs. Lawrence?"

Miss Bunting laughed outright.

"Oh, dear no," she answered. "Mrs. Lawrence is out, and she asked me to see that you had everything you wanted. I'm the lady-help, you know."

Diana regarded her commiseratingly. She seemed such a jolly, bright little thing to be occupying that anomalous position.

"Oh, are you? Then it was you"—with a sudden inspiration—"who put these lovely daffodils here, wasn't it? . . . Thank you so much for thinking of it—it was kind of you." And she held out her hand with the frank charm of manner which invariably turned Diana's acquaintances into friends inside ten minutes.

Little Miss Bunting flushed delightedly, and from that moment onward became one of the new boarder's most devoted adherents.

"You'd like some tea, I expect," she said presently. "Will you have it up here—or in the dining-room with the other boarders in half an hour's time?"

"Oh, up here, please. I can't possibly wait half an hour."

"I ought to tell you," Miss Bunting continued, dimpling a little, "that it will be sixpence extra if you have it up here. *'All meals served in rooms, sixpence extra,'* " she read out, pointing to the printed list of rules and regulations hanging prominently above the chimney-piece.

Diana regarded it with amusement.

"They ought to be written on tablets of stone like the Ten Commandments," she commented frivolously. "It rather reminds me of being at school again. I've never lived in a boarding-house before, you know; I had rooms in the house of an old servant of ours. Well, here goes!"—twisting the framed set of rules round with its face to the wall. "Now, if I break the laws of the Medes and Persians I can't be blamed, because I haven't read them."

Miss Bunting privately thought that the new boarder, recommended by so great a personage as Signor Baroni, stood an excellent chance of being allowed a generous latitude as regards conforming to the rules at No. 24—provided she paid her bills promptly and without too careful a scrutiny of the "extras." Bunty, indeed, retained few illusions concerning her employer, and perhaps this was just as well—for the fewer the illusions by which you're handicapped, the fewer your disappointments before the journey's end.

"You haven't told me your name," said Diana, when the lady-help reappeared with a small tea-tray in her hand.

"Bunting," came the smiling reply. "But most of the boarders call me Bunty."

"I shall, too, may I?—And oh, why haven't you brought two cups? I wanted you to have tea with me—if you've time, that is?"

"If I had brought a second cup, *'Tea for two'* would have been charged to your account," observed Miss Bunting.

"What?" Diana's eyes grew round with astonishment. "With the same sized teapot?"

The other nodded humorously.

"Well, Mrs. Lawrence's logic is beyond me," pursued Diana. "However, we'll obviate the difficulty. I'll have tea out of my tooth-glass"—glancing towards the washstand in the adjoining room where that article, inverted, capped the water-bottle—"and you, being the honoured guest, shall luxuriate in the cup."

Bunty modestly protested, but Diana had her own way in

the matter, and when finally the little lady-help went downstairs to pour out tea in the dining-room for the rest of the boarders, it was with that pleasantly warm glow about the region of the heart which the experience of an unexpected kindness is prone to produce.

Meanwhile Diana busied herself unpacking her clothes and putting them away in the rather limited cupboard accommodation provided, and in fixing up a few pictures, recklessly hammering the requisite nails into the walls in happy disregard of Rule III of the printed list, which emphatically stated that: *"No nails must be driven into the walls without permission."*

By the time she had completed these operations a dressing-bell sounded, and quickly exchanging her travelling costume for a filmy little dinner dress of some soft, shimmering material, she sallied downstairs in search of the dining-room.

Mrs. Lawrence met her on the threshold, warmly welcoming, and conducting her to her allotted place at the lower end of a long table, around which were seated—as it appeared to Diana in that first dizzy moment of arrival—dozens of young women varying from twenty to thirty years of age. In reality there were but a baker's dozen of them, and they all painstakingly abstained from glancing in her direction lest they might be thought guilty of rudely staring at a newcomer.

Diana's *vis-à-vis* at table was the redoubtable Miss Jenkins of coal-box fame, and her neighbours on either hand two students of one of the musical colleges. Next to Miss Jenkins, Diana observed a vacant place; presumably its owner was dining out. She also noticed that she alone among the boarders had attempted to make any kind of evening toilet. The others had "changed" from their workaday clothes, it is true, but a light silk blouse, worn with a darker skirt, appeared to be generally regarded as a sufficient recognition of the occasion.

Diana's near neighbours were at first somewhat tongue-

tied with a nervous stiffness common to the Britisher, but they thawed a little as the meal progressed, and when the musical students, Miss Jones and Miss Allen, had elicited that she was actually a pupil of the great Baroni, envy and a certain awed admiration combined to unseal the fountains of their speech.

Just as the fish was being removed, the door opened to admit a tall, thin woman, wearing outdoor costume, who passed quickly down the room and took the vacant place at the table, murmuring a curt apology to Mrs. Lawrence on her way. To Diana's astonishment she recognised in the newcomer Olga Lermontof, Baroni's accompanist.

"Miss Lermontof!" she exclaimed. "I had no idea that you lived here."

Miss Lermontof nodded a brief greeting.

"How d'you do? Yes, I've lived here for some time. But I didn't know that you were coming. I thought you had rooms somewhere?"

"So I had. But I was obliged to give them up, and Signor Baroni suggested this instead."

"Hope you'll like it," returned Miss Lermontof shortly. "At any rate, it has the advantage of being only quarter of an hour's walk from Grellingham Place. I've just come from there." And with that she relapsed into silence.

Although Olga Lermontof had frequently accompanied Diana during her lessons with Baroni, the acquaintance between the two had made but small progress. There had been but little opportunity for conversation on those occasions, and Diana, instinctively resenting the accompanist's cool and rather off-hand manner, had never sought to become better acquainted with her. It was generally supposed that she was a Russian, and she was undoubtedly a highly gifted musician, but there was something oddly disagreeable and repellent about her personality. Whenever Diana had thought about her at all, she had mentally likened her to Ishmael, whose hand was against every man and every man's hand

against his. And now she found herself involved with this strange woman in the rather close intimacy of daily life consequent upon becoming fellow-boarders in the same house.

Seen amidst so many strange faces, the familiarity of Olga Lermontof's clever but rather forbidding visage bred a certain new sense of comradeship, and Diana made several tentative efforts to draw her into conversation. The results were meagre, however, the Russian confining herself to monosyllabic answers until some one—one of the musical students—chanced to mention that she had recently been to the Premier Theatre to see Adrienne de Gervais in a new play, "The Grey Gown," which had just been produced there.

It was then that Miss Lermontof apparently awoke to the fact that the English language contains further possibilities than a bare "yes" or "no."

"I consider Adrienne de Gervais a most overrated actress," she remarked succinctly.

A chorus of disagreement greeted this announcement.

"Why, only think how quickly she's got on," argued Miss Jones. "No one three years ago—and to-day Max Errington writes all his plays round her."

"Precisely. And it's easy enough to 'create a part' successfully if that part has been previously written specially to suit you," retorted Miss Lermontof unmoved.

The discussion of Adrienne de Gervais' merits, or demerits, threatened to develop into a violent disagreement, and Diana was struck by a certain personal acrimony that seemed to flavour Miss Lermontof's criticism of the popular actress. Finally, with the idea of averting a quarrel between the disputants, she mentioned that the actress, accompanied by her chaperon, had been staying in the neighbourhood of her own home.

"Mr. Errington was with them also," she added.

"He usually is," commented Miss Lermontof disagreeably.

"He's a remarkably fine pianist," said Diana. "Do you know him personally at all?"

"I've met him," replied Olga. Her green eyes narrowed suddenly, and she regarded Diana with a rather curious expression on her face.

"Is he a professional pianist?" pursued Diana. She was conscious of an intense curiosity concerning Errington, quite apart from the personal episodes which had linked them together. The man of mystery invariably exerts a peculiar fascination over the feminine mind. Hence the unmerited popularity not infrequently enjoyed by the dark, saturnine, brooding individual whose conversation savours of the tensely monosyllabic.

Olga Lermontof paused a moment before replying to Diana's query. The she said briefly:—

"No. He's a dramatist. I shouldn't allow myself to become too interested in him if I were you."

She smiled a trifle grimly at Diana's sudden flush, and her manner indicated that, as far as she was concerned, the subject was closed.

Diana felt an inward conviction that Miss Lermontof knew much more concerning Max Errington than she chose to admit, and when she fell asleep that night it was to dream that she and Errington were trying to find each other through the gloom of a thick fog, whilst all the time the dark-browed, sinister face of Olga Lermontof kept appearing and disappearing between them, smiling tauntingly at their efforts.

CHAPTER IX

A CONTEST OF WILLS

DIANA was sitting in Baroni's music-room, waiting, with more or less patience, for a singing lesson. The old *maestro* was in an unmistakable ill-humour this morning, and he had detained the pupil whose lesson preceded her own far beyond the allotted time, storming at the unfortunate young man until Diana marvelled that the latter had sufficient nerve to continue singing at all.

In a whirl of fury Baroni informed him that he was exactly suited to be a third-rate music-hall artiste—the young man, be it said, was making a special study of oratorio—and that it was profanation for any one with so incalculably little idea of the very first principles of art to attempt to interpret the works of the great masters, together with much more of a like explosive character. Finally, he dismissed him abruptly and turned to Diana.

"Ah—Mees Quentin." He softened a little. He had a great affection for this promising pupil of his, and welcomed her with a smile. "I am seek of that young man with his voice of an archangel and his brains of a feesh! . . . So! You haf come back from your visit to the country? And how goes it with the voice?"

"I expect I'm a bit rusty after my holiday," she replied diplomatically, fondly hoping to pave the way for more lenient treatment than had been accorded to the luckless student of oratorio.

Unfortunately, however, it chanced to be one of those sharply chilly days to which May occasionally treats us. Baroni frankly detested cold weather—it upset both his

nerves and his temper—and Diana speedily realised that no excuses would avail to smooth her path on this occasion.

"Scales," commanded Baroni, and struck a chord.

She began to sing obediently, but at the end of the third scale he stopped her.

"Bah! It sounds like an elephant coming downstairs! Be-r-r-rump . . . be-r-r-rump . . . be-r-r-rump . . .br-r-rum! Do not, please, sing as an elephant walks."

Diana coloured and tried again, but without marked success. She was genuinely out of practice, and the nervousness with which Baroni's obvious ill-humour inspired her did not mend matters.

"But what haf you been doing during the holidays?" exclaimed the *maestro* at last, his odd, husky voice fierce with annoyance. "There is no ease—no flexibility. You are as stiff as a rusty hinge. Ach! But you will haf to work—not play any more."

He frowned portentously, then with a swift change to a more reasonable mood, he continued:—

"Let us haf some songs—Saint-Saens' *Amour, viens aider.* Perhaps that will wake you up, *hein?*"

Instead, it carried Diana swiftly back to the Rectory at Crailing, to the evening when she had sung this very song to Max Errington, with the unhappy Joan stumbling through the accompaniment. She began to sing, her mind occupied with quite other matters than Delilah's passion of vengeance, and her face expressive of nothing more stirring than a gentle reminiscence. Baroni stopped abruptly and placed a big mirror in front of her.

"Please to look at your face, Mees Quentin," he said scathingly. "It is as wooden as your singing."

He was a confirmed advocate of the importance of facial expression in a singer, and Diana's vague, abstracted look was rapidly raising his ire. Recalled by the biting scorn in his tones, she made a gallant effort to throw herself more effectually into the song, but the memory of Errington's

grave, intent face, as he had sat listening to her that night, kept coming betwixt her and the meaning of the music—and the result was even more unpromising than before.

In another moment Baroni was on his feet, literally dancing with rage.

"But do you then call yourself an *artiste?*" he broke out furiously. "Why has the good God given you eyes and a mouth? That they may express nothing—nothing at all? Bah! You haf the face of a gootta-per-r-rcha doll!"

And snatching up the music from the piano in an uncontrollable burst of fury, he flung it straight at her, and the two of them stood glaring at each other for a few moments in silence. Then Baroni pointed to the song, lying open on the floor between them, and said explosively:—

"Pick that up."

Diana regarded him coolly, her small face set like a flint.

"No." She fairly threw the negative at him.

He stared at her—he was accustomed to more docile pupils—and the two girls who had remained in the room to listen to the lessons following their own huddled together with scared faces. The *maestro* in a royal rage was ever, in their opinion, to be regarded from much the same viewpoint as a thunderbolt, and that any one of his pupils should dare to defy him was unheard-of. In the same situation as that in which Diana found herself, either of the two girls in question would have meekly picked up the music and, dissolving into tears, made the continuance of the lesson an impossibility, only to be bullied by the *maestrro* even more execrably next time.

"Pick that up," repeated Baroni stormily.

"I shall do nothing of the kind," retorted Diana promptly. "You threw it there, and you can pick it up. I'm going home." And, turning her back upon him, she marched towards the door.

A sudden twinkle showed itself in Baroni's eyes. With unaccustomed celerity he pranced after her.

"Come back, little Pepper-pot, come back, then, and we will continue the lesson."

Diana turned and stood hesitating.

"Who's going to pick up that music?" she demanded unflinchingly.

"Why, I will, thou most obstinate child"—suiting the action to the word. "Because it is true that professors should not throw music at their pupils, no matter"—maliciously—"how stupid nor how dull they may be at their lesson."

Diana flushed, immediately repentant.

"I'm sorry," she acknowledged frankly. "I was being abominably inattentive; I was thinking of something else."

The little scene was characteristic of her—unbendingly determined and obstinate when she thought she was wronged and unjustly treated, impulsively ready to ask pardon when she saw herself at fault.

Baroni patted her hand affectionately.

"See, my dear, I am a cross-grained, ugly old man, am I not?" he said placidly.

"Yes, you are," agreed Diana, to the awed amazement of the other two pupils, at the same time bestowing a radiant smile upon him.

Baroni beamed back at her benevolently.

"So! Thus we agree—we are at one, as master and pupil should be. Is it not so?"

Diana nodded, amusement in her eyes.

"Then, being agreed, we can continue our lesson. Imagine yourself, please, to be Delilah, brooding on your vengeance, gloating over what you are about to accomplish. Can you not picture her to yourself—beautiful, sinister, like a snake that winds itself about the body"—his voice fell to a penetrating whisper—"and, in her heart, dreaming of the triumph that shall bring Samson at last a captive to destruction?"

Something in the tense excitement of his whispering tones struck an answering chord within Diana, and oblivious for the moment of all else except Delilah's passionate thirst for vengeance, she sang with her whole soul, so that when she ceased, Baroni, in a sudden access of artistic fervour, leapt from his seat and embraced her rapturously.

"Well done! That is true art—art and intelligence allied to the voice of gold which the good God has given you."

Absorbed in the music, neither master nor pupil had observed that during the course of the song the door had been softly unlatched from outside and held ajar, and now, just as Diana was somewhat blushingly extricating herself from Baroni's fervent clasp, it was thrown open and the unseen listener came into the room.

Baroni whirled round and advanced with outstretched hands, his face wreathed in smiles.

"*A la bonne heure!* You haf come just at a good moment, Mees de Gervais, to hear this pupil of mine who will some day be one of the world's great singers."

Adrienne de Gervais shook hands.

"I've been listening, Baroni. She has a marvellous voice. But"—looking at Diana pleasantly—"we are neighbours, surely? I have seen you in Crailing—where we have just taken a house called Red Gables."

"Yes, I live at Crailing," replied Diana, a little shyly.

"And I saw you there one day—you were sitting in a pony-trap, waiting outside a cottage, and singing to yourself. I noticed the quality of her voice then," added Miss de Gervais, turning to the *maestro*.

"Yes," said Baroni, with placid content. "It is superb."

Adrienne turned back to Diana with a delightful smile.

"Since we are neighbours in the country, Miss Quentin, we ought to be friends in town. Won't you come and see me one day?"

Diana flushed. She was undoubtedly attracted by the actress's charming personality, but beyond this lay the

knowledge that it was more than likely that at her house she might again encounter Errington. And though Diana told herself that he was nothing to her—in fact, that she disliked him rather than otherwise—the chance of meeting him once more was not to be foregone—if only for the opportunity it would give her of showing him how much she disliked him!

"I should like to come very much," she answered.

"Then come and have tea with me to-morrow—no, to-morrow I'm engaged. Shall we say Thursday?"

Diana acquiesced, and Miss de Gervais turned to Baroni with a rather mischievous smile, saying something in a foreign tongue which Diana took to be Russian. Baroni replied in the same language, frowningly, and although she could not understand the tenor of his answer, Diana was positive that she caught her own name and that of Max Errington uttered in conjunction with each other.

It struck her as an odd coincidence that Baroni should be acquainted both with Miss de Gervais and with Errington, and at her next lesson she ventured to comment on the former's visit. Baroni's answer, however, furnished a perfectly simple explanation of it.

"Mees de Gervais? Oh, yes, she sings a song in her new play, 'The Grey Gown,' and I haf always coached her in her songs. She has a pree-ty voice—nothing beeg, but quite pree-ty."

Diana set forth on her visit to Adrienne with a certain amount of trepidation. Much as she longed to see Max Errington again, she felt that the first meeting after that last episode of their acquaintance might well partake of the somewhat doubtful pleasure of skating on thin ice.

It was therefore not without a feeling of relief that she found the actress and her chaperon the only occupants of the former's pretty drawing-room. They both welcomed her cordially.

"I have heard so much about you," said Mrs. Adams,

pleasantly, "that I've been longing to meet you, Miss Quentin. Adrienne calls you the 'girl with the golden voice,' and I'm hoping to have the pleasure of hearing you sing."

Diana was getting used to having her voice referred to as something rather wonderful; it no longer embarrassed her, so she murmured an appropriate answer and the conversation then drifted naturally to Crailing and to the lucky chance which had brought Errington past Culver Point the day Diana was marooned there, and Diana explained that the Rector and his daughter had intended calling upon the occupants of Red Gables, but had been prevented by their sudden departure.

Adrienne laughed.

"Yes, I expect every one thought we were quite mad to run away like that so soon after our arrival! It was a sudden idea of Mr. Errington's. He declared he was not satisfied about something in the staging of 'The Grey Gown,' and of course we must needs all rush up to town to see about it. There wasn't the least necessity, as it turned out, but when Max takes an idea into his head there's no stopping him."

"No," added Mrs. Adams. "And the sheer cruelty of bustling an elderly person like me from one end of England to the other just to suit his whims doesn't seem to move him in the slightest."

She was smiling broadly as she spoke, and it was evident to Diana that to both these women Max Errington's word was law—a law they obeyed, however, with the utmost cheerfulness.

"But, of course, we are coming back again," pursued Miss de Gervais. "I think Crailing is a delightful little place, and I am going to regard Red Gables as a haven of refuge from the storms of professional life. So I hope"—smilingly —"that the Rectory will call on Red Gables when next we are 'in residence.' "

The time passed quickly, and when tea was disposed of

Adrienne looked out from amongst her songs one or two which were known to Diana, and Mrs. Adams was given the opportunity of hearing the "golden voice."

And then, just as Diana was preparing to leave, a maid threw open a door and announced:—

"Mr. Errington."

Diana felt her heart contract suddenly, and the sound of his voice, as he greeted Adrienne and Mrs. Adams, sent a thrill through every nerve in her body.

"You mustn't go now." She was vaguely conscious that Adrienne was speaking to her. "Max, here is Miss Quentin, whom you gallantly rescued from Culver Point."

The actress was dimpling and smiling, a spice of mischief in her soft blue eyes. She and Mrs. Adams had not omitted to chaff Errington about his involuntary knight-errantry, and the former had even laughingly declared it her firm belief that his journey to town the next day partook more of the nature of flight than anything else. To all of which Errington had submitted composedly, declining to add anything further to his bare statement of the incident of Culver Point—mention of which had been entailed by his unexpected absence from Red Gables that evening.

He gave a scarcely perceptible start of surprise as his eyes fell upon Diana, but he betrayed no pleasure at seeing her again. His face showed nothing beyond the polite, impersonal interest which any stranger might exhibit.

"I have just missed the pleasure of hearing you sing, I'm afraid," he said, shaking hands. "Have you been back in town long, Miss Quentin?"

"No, only a few days," she answered. "I had my first lesson with Signor Baroni the other day, and it was then that I met Miss de Gervais."

"At Baroni's?" Diana intercepted a swift glance pass between him and Adrienne.

"Yes," said the latter quickly. "I went to rehearse my

song in 'The Grey Gown' with him. He was rather crochety that day," she added, smiling.

Diana smiled in sympathy.

"Well, if he was crochety with you, Miss de Gervais," she observed, "you can perhaps imagine what he was like to me!"

"Was he so very bad?" asked Adrienne, laughing. "Every one says his temper is diabolical."

"It is," replied Diana, with conviction.

"Still," broke in Errington's quiet voice, "I should have thought he would have found it somewhat difficult to be very angry with Miss Quentin."

Diana fancied she detected the familiar flavour of irony in the cool tones.

"On the contrary, he apparently found it perfectly simple," she retorted sharply.

"And yet," interposed Adrienne, "from the panegyrics he indulged in upon the subject of your voice after you had gone, I'm sure he thinks the world of you."

"Oh, I'm just a voice to him—nothing more," said Diana.

"To be 'just a voice' to Baroni means to be the most important thing on earth," observed Errington. "I believe he would imperil his immortal soul to give a supremely beautiful voice to the world."

"Nonsense, Max," protested Adrienne. "You talk as if he were perfectly conscienceless."

"So he is, except in so far as art is concerned, and then his conscience assumes the form of sheer idolatry. I believe he would sacrifice anything and anybody for the sake of it."

"Well, it's to be hoped you're wrong," said Adrienne, smiling, and again Diana thought she detected a glance of mutual understanding pass between the actress and Max Errington.

A little uncomfortable sense as of being *de trop* invaded her. She felt that for some reason Errington would be

glad when she had gone. Possibly he had come to see Miss de Gervais about some business matter in connection with the play he had written, and was only awaiting her departure to discuss it. He had not appeared in the least pleased to find her there on his arrival, and from that moment onward the conversation had become distinctly laboured.

She wished very much that Miss de Gervais had not pressed her to stay when he came, and at the first opportunity she rose to go. This time, Adrienne made no effort to detain her, although she asked her cordially to come again another day.

As Diana drove back in a taxi to Brutton Square she was conscious of a queer sense of disappointment in the outcome of her meeting with Max Errington. It had been so utterly different from anything she had expected—quite commonplace and ordinary, exactly as though they had been no more than the most casual acquaintances.

She hardly knew what she had actually anticipated. Certainly, she told herself irritably, she could not have expected him to have treated her with marked warmth of manner in the presence of others, and therefore his behaviour had been just what the circumstances demanded. But, notwithstanding the assurance she gave herself that this was the common-sense view to take of the matter, she had an instinctive feeling that, even had there been no one else to consider, Errington's manner would still have shown no greater cordiality. For some reason he had decided to lock the door on the past, and the polite friendly indifference with which he had treated her was intended to indicate quite clearly the attitude he proposed to adopt.

She supposed he repented that brief, vivid moment in the car, and wished her to understand that it held no significance—that it was merely a chance incident in this world where one amuses oneself as occasion offers. Presumably he feared that, not being a woman of the world, she might

attach a deeper meaning to it than the circumstances warranted, and was anxious to set her right on that point.

Her pride rose in revolt. Olga Lermontof's words returned to her mind with fresh enlightenment: "I shouldn't allow myself to become too interested in him, if I were you." Surely she had intended this as a friendly warning to Diana not to take anything Max Errington might do or say very seriously!

Well, there would be no danger of that in the future; she had learned her lesson and would take care to profit by it.

CHAPTER X

MISS LERMONTOF'S ADVICE

AS Diana entered the somewhat dingy hall at 24 Brutton Square on her return from visiting Adrienne, the first person she encountered was Olga Lermontof. She still retained her dislike of the accompanist and was preparing to pass by with a casual remark upon the coldness of the weather, when something in the Russian's pale, fatigued face arrested her.

"How frightfully tired you look!" she exclaimed, pausing on the staircase as the two made their way up together.

"I am, rather," returned Miss Lermontof indifferently. "I've been playing accompaniments all afternoon, and I've had no tea."

Diana hesitated an instant, then she said impulsively—

"Oh, do come into my room and let me make you a cup."

Olga Lermontof regarded her with a faint surprise.

"Thanks," she said in her abrupt way. "I will."

A cheerful little fire was burning in the grate, and the room presented a very comfortable and home-like appearance, for Diana had added a couple of easy-chairs and several Liberty cushions to its somewhat sparse furniture. A heavy curtain, hung in front of the door to exclude draughts, gave an additional cosy touch, and fresh flowers adorned both chimney-piece and table.

Olga Lermontof let her long, lithe figure down into one of the easy-chairs with a sigh of satisfaction, while Diana set the kettle on the fire to boil, and produced from the

depths of a cupboard a canister of tea and a tin of attractive-looking biscuits.

"I often make my own tea up here," she observed. "I detest having it in that great barrack of a dining-room downstairs. The bread-and-butter is always so thick—like doorsteps!—and the cake is very emphatically of the 'plain, home-made' variety."

Olga nodded.

"You look very comfortable here," she replied. If you saw my tiny bandbox of a room on the fourth floor you'd realise what a sybarite you are."

Diana wondered a little why Olga Lermontof should need to economise by having such a small room and one so high up. She was invariably well-dressed—Diana had frequently caught glimpses of silken petticoats and expensive shoes—and she had not in the least the air of a woman who is accustomed to small means.

Almost as though she had uttered her thought aloud, Miss Lermontof replied to it, smiling rather satirically.

"You're thinking I don't look the part? It's true I haven't always been so poor as I am now. But a lot of my money is invested in Ru—abroad, and owing to—to various things" —she stammered a little—"I can't get hold of it just at present, so I'm dependent on what I make. And an accompanist doesn't earn a fortune, you know. But I can't quite forego pretty clothes—I wasn't brought up that way. So I economise over my room."

Diana was rather touched by the little confidence; somehow she didn't fancy the other had found it very easy to make, and she liked her all the better for it.

"No," she agreed, as she poured out two steaming cups of tea. "I suppose accompanying doesn't pay as well as some other things—the stage, for example. I should think Adrienne de Gervais makes plenty of money."

"She has private means, I believe," returned Miss Lermontof. "But, of course, she gets an enormous salary."

She was drinking her tea appreciatively, and a little colour had crept into her cheeks, although the shadows still lay heavily beneath her light-green eyes. They were of a curious translucent green, the more noticeable against the contrasting darkness of her hair and brows; they reminded one of the colour of Chinese jade.

"I've just been to tea with Miss de Gervais," voluntcered Diana, after a pause.

A swift look of surprise crossed Olga Lermontof's face.

"I didn't know you had met her," she said slowly.

"Yes, we met at Signor Baroni's the other day. She came in during my lesson. I believe I told you she had taken a house at Crailing, so that at home we are neighbours, you see."

Miss Lermontof consumed a biscuit in silence. Then she said abruptly:—

"Miss Quentin, I know you don't like me, but—well, I have an odd sort of wish to do you a good turn. You had better have nothing to do with Adrienne de Gervais."

Diana stared at her in undisguised amazement, the quick colour rushing into her face as it always did when she was startled or surprised.

"But—but why?" she stammered.

"I can't tell you why. Only take my advice and leave her alone."

"But I thought her delightful," protested Diana. "And" —wistfully—"I haven't many friends in London."

"Miss de Gervais isn't quite all she seems. And your art should be your friend—you don't need any other."

Diana laughed.

"You talk like old Baroni himself! But indeed I do want friends—I haven't nearly reached the stage when art can take the place of nice human people."

Miss Lermontof regarded her dispassionately.

"That's only because you're young—horribly young and warm-hearted."

"You talk as if you yourself were a near relation of Methuselah!"—laughing.

"I'm thirty-five," returned Olga. "And that's old enough to know that nine-tenths of your 'nice human people' are self-seeking vampires living on the generosity of the other tenth. Besides, you have only to wait till you come out professionally and you can have as many so-called friends as you choose. You'll scarcely need to lift your little finger and they'll come flocking round you. I don't think"—looking at her speculatively—"that you've any conception what your voice is going to do for you. You see, it isn't just an ordinary good voice—it's one of the exceptional voices that are only vouchsafed once or twice in a century."

"Still, I think I should like to have a few friends—now. *My* friend, I mean—not just the friends of my voice!"—with a smile.

"Well, don't include Miss de Gervais in the number—or Max Errington either."

She watched Diana's sudden flush, and shrugging her shoulders, added sardonically:—

"I suppose, however, it's useless to try and stop a marble rolling down hill. . . . Well, later on, remember that I warned you."

Diana stared into the fire for a moment in silence. Then she asked with apparent irrelevance:—

"Is Mr. Errington married?"

"He is not." Diana's heart suddenly sang within her. "Nor," continued Miss Lermontof keenly, "is there any likelihood of his ever marrying."

The song broke off abruptly.

"I should have thought," said Diana slowly, "that he was just the kind of man who *would* marry. He is"—with a little effort—"very delightful."

Miss Lermontof got up to go.

"You have a saying in England: *'All is not gold that glitters.* It is very good sense," she observed.

"Do you mean"—Diana's eyes were suddenly apprehensive—"do you mean that he has done anything wrong—dishonourable?"

"I think," replied Olga Lermontof incisively, "that it would be very dishonourable of him if he tried to—to make you care for him."

She moved towards the door as she spoke, and Diana followed her.

"But why—why do you tell me this?" she faltered.

The Russian's queer green eyes held an odd expression as she answered:—

"Perhaps it's because I like you very much better than you do me. You're one of the few genuine warm-hearted people I've met—and I don't want you to be unhappy. Good-bye," she added carelessly, "thank you for my tea."

The door closed behind her, and Diana, returning to her seat by the fire, sat staring into the flames, puzzling over what she had heard.

Miss Lermontof's curious warning had frightened her a little. She apparently possessed some intimate knowledge of the affairs both of Max Errington and Adrienne de Gervais, and what she knew did not appear to be very favourable to either of them.

Diana had intuitively felt from the very beginning of her acquaintance with Errington that there was something secret, something hidden, about him, and in a way this had added to her interest in him. It had seized hold of her imagination, kept him vividly before her mind as nothing else could have done, and now Olga Lermontof's strange hints and innuendos gave a fresh fillip to her desire to know in what way Max Errington differed from his fellows.

"It would be dishonourable of him to make you care," Miss Lermontof had said.

The words seemed to ring in Diana's ears, and side by side with them, as though to add a substance of reality, came

the memory of Errington's own bitter exclamation: "I forgot that I'm a man barred out from all that makes life worth living!"

She felt as though she had drawn near some invisible web, of which every now and then a single filament brushed against her—almost impalpable, yet touching her with the fleetest and lightest of contacts.

During the weeks that followed, Diana became more or less an intimate at Adrienne's house in Somervell Street. The actress seemed to have taken a great fancy to her, and although she was several years Diana's senior, the difference in age formed no appreciable stumbling-block to the growth of the friendship between them.

On her part, Diana regarded Adrienne with the enthusiastic devotion which an older woman—more especially if she happens to be very beautiful and occupying a somewhat unique position—frequently inspires in one younger than herself, and Olga Lermontof's grave warning might just as well have been uttered to the empty air. Diana's warm-hearted, spontaneous nature swept it aside with an almost passionate loyalty and belief in her new-found friend.

Once Miss Lermontof had referred to it rather disagreeably.

"So you've decided to make a friend of Miss de Gervais after all?" she said.

"Yes. And I think you've misjudged her utterly," Diana warmly assured her. "Of course," she added, sensitively afraid that the other might misconstrue her meaning, "I know you believed what you were saying, and that you only said it out of kindness to me. But you were mistaken—really you were."

"Humph!" The Russian's eyes narrowed until they looked like two slits of green fire. "Humph! I was wrong, was I? Nevertheless, I'm perfectly sure that Adrienne de

Gervais' past is a closed book to you—although you call yourself her friend!"

Diana turned away without reply. It was true—Olga Lermontof had laid a finger on the weak spot in her friendship with Adrienne. The latter never talked to her of her past life; their mutual attachment was built solely around the present, and if by chance any question of Diana's accidentally probed into the past, it was adroitly parried. Even of Adrienne's nationality she was in ignorance, merely understanding, along with the rest of the world, that she was of French extraction. This assumption had probably been founded in the first instance upon her name, and Adrienne never troubled either to confirm or contradict it.

Mrs. Adams, her companion-chaperon, always made Diana especially welcome at the house in Somervell Street.

"You must come again soon, my dear," she would say cordially. "Adrienne makes few friends—and your visits are such a relaxation to her. The life she leads is rather a strain, you know."

At times Diana noticed a curious aloofness in her friend, as though her professional success occupied a position of relatively small importance in her estimation, and once she had commented on it half jokingly.

"You don't seem to value your laurels one bit," she had said, as Adrienne contemptuously tossed aside a newspaper containing a eulogy of her claims to distinction which most actresses would have carefully cut out and pasted into their book of critiques.

"Fame?" Adrienne had answered. "What is it? Merely the bubble of a day."

"Well," returned Diana, laughing, "it's the aim and object of a good many people's lives. It's the bubble I'm in pursuit of, and if I obtain one half the recognition you have had, I shall be very content."

Adrienne regarded her musingly.

"You will be famous when the name of Adrienne de Gervais is known no longer," she said at last.

Diana stared at her in surprise.

"But why? Even if I should succeed within the next few years, you will still be Adrienne de Gervais, the famous actress."

Adrienne smiled across at her.

"Ah, I cannot tell you why," she said lightly. "But—I think it will be like that."

Her eyes gazed dreamily into space, as though she perceived some vision of the future, but whether that future were of rose and gold or only of a dull grey, Diana could not tell.

Of Max Errington she saw very little. It seemed as though he were determined to avoid her, for she frequently saw him leaving Adrienne's house on a day when she was expected there—hurrying away just as she herself was approaching from the opposite end of the street.

Only once or twice, when she had chanced to pay an unexpected visit, had he come in and found her there. On these occasions his manner had been studiously cold and indifferent, and any effort on her part towards establishing a more friendly footing had been invariably checked by some cruelly ironical remark, which had brought the blood to her cheeks and, almost, the tears to her eyes. She reflected grimly that Olga Lermontof's warning words had proved decidedly superfluous.

Meanwhile, she had struck up a friendship with Errington's private secretary, a young man of the name of Jerry Leigh, who was a frequent visitor at Adrienne's house. Jerry was, in truth, the sort of person with whom it was impossible to be otherwise than friendly. He was of a delightful ugliness, twenty-five years of age, penniless except for the salary he received from Errington, and he possessed a talent for friendship much as other folk possess a talent for music or art or dancing.

Diana's first meeting with him had occurred quite by chance. Both Adrienne and Mrs. Adams happened to be out one afternoon when she called, and she was awaiting their return when the door of the drawing-room suddenly opened to admit a remarkably plain young man, who, on seeing her ensconced in one of the big arm-chairs, stood hesitating as though undecided whether to remain or to take refuge in instant flight.

Adrienne had talked so much about Jerry—of whom she was exceedingly fond—and had so often described his charming ugliness to Diana that the latter was in no doubt at all as to whom the newcomer might be.

She nodded to him reassuringly.

"Don't run away," she said calmly, "I don't bite."

The young man promptly closed the door and advanced into the room.

"Don't you?" he said in relieved tones. "Thank you for telling me. One never knows."

"If you've come to see Miss de Gervais, I'm afraid you can't at present, as she's out," pursued Diana. "I'm waiting for her."

"Then we can wait together," returned Mr. Leigh, with an engaging smile. "It will be much more amusing than waiting in solitude, won't it?"

"That I can't tell you—yet," replied Diana demurely.

"I'll ask you again in half an hour," he returned undaunted. "I'm Leigh, you know, Jerry Leigh, Errington's secretary."

"I suppose, then, you're a very busy person?"

"Well, pretty much so in the mornings and sometimes up till late at night, but Errington's a rattling good 'boss' and very often gives me an 'afternoon out.' That's why I'm here now. I'm off duty and Miss de Gervais told me I might come to tea whenever I'm free. You see"—confidentially—"I've very few friends in London."

"Same here," responded Diana shortly.

"No, not really?"—with obvious satisfaction. "Then we ought to pal up together, oughtn't we?"

"Don't you want my credentials?" asked Diana, smiling.

"Lord, no! One has only to look at you."

Diana laughed outright.

"That's quite the nicest compliment I've ever received, Mr. Leigh," she said.

(It was odd that while Errington always made her feel rather small and depressingly young, with Jerry Leigh she felt herself to be quite a woman of the world.)

"It isn't a compliment," protested Jerry stoutly. "It's just the plain, unvarnished truth."

"I'm afraid your 'boss' wouldn't agree with you."

"Oh, nonsense!"

"Indeed it isn't. He always treats me as though I were a hot potato, and he were afraid of burning his fingers."

Jerry roared.

"Well, perhaps he's got good reason."

Diana shook her head smilingly.

"Oh, no. It's not that. Mr. Errington doesn't like me."

Jerry stared at her reflectively.

"That couldn't be true," he said at last, with conviction.

"I don't know that I like him—very much—either," pursued Diana.

"You would if you really knew him," said the boy eagerly. "He's one of the very best."

"He's rather a mysterious person, don't you think?"

Jerry regarded her very straightly.

"Oh, well," he returned bluntly, "every man's a right to have his own private affairs."

Then there *was* something!

Diana felt her heart beat a little faster. She had thrown out the remark as the merest feeler, and now his own secretary, the man who must be nearer to him than any other,

had given what was tantamount to an acknowledgment of the fact that Errington's life held some secret.

"Anyway"—Jerry was speaking again—"*I've* got good reason to be grateful to him. I was on my uppers when he happened along—and without any prospect of re-soling. I'd played the fool at Monte Carlo, and, like a brick, he offered me the job of private secretary, and I've been with him ever since. I'd no references, either—he just took me on trust."

"That was very kind of him," said Diana slowly.

"Kind! There isn't one man in a hundred who'll give a chance like that to a young ass that's played the goat as I did."

"No," agreed Diana. "But," she added, rather low, "he isn't always kind."

At this moment the door opened, and the subject of their conversation entered the room. He paused on the threshold, and for an instant Diana could have sworn that as his eyes met her own a sudden light of pleasure flashed into their blue depths, only to be immediately replaced by his usual look of cold indifference. He glanced round the room, apparently somewhat surprised to find Diana and his secretary its sole occupants.

"We're all here now except our hostess," observed the latter cheerfully, following his thought.

"So it seems. I didn't know"—looking across from Jerry to Diana in a puzzled way—"that you two were acquainted with each other."

"We aren't—at least, we weren't," replied Jerry. "We met by chance, like two angels that have made a bid for the same cloud."

Errington smiled faintly.

"And did you persuade your—fellow angel—to sing to you?" he asked drily.

"No. Does she sing?"

"*Does she sing?* . . . Jerry, my young and ignorant

friend, let me introduce you to Miss Diana Quentin, the——"

"Good Lord!" broke in Jerry, his face falling. "Are you Miss Quentin—*the* Miss Quentin? Of course I've heard all about you—you're going to be the biggest star in the musical firmament—and here have I been gassing away about my little affairs just as though you were an ordinary mortal like myself."

Diana was beginning to laugh at the boy's nonsense when Errington cut in quietly.

"Then you've been making a great mistake, Jerry," he said. "Miss Quentin doesn't in the least resemble ordinary mortals. She isn't afflicted by like passions with ourselves, and she doesn't understand—or forgive them."

The words, uttered as though in jest, held an undercurrent of meaning for Diana that sent the colour flying up under her clear skin. There was a bitter taunt in them that none knew better than she how to interpret.

She winced under it, and a fierce resentment flared up within her that he should dare to reproach her—he, who had been the offender from first to last. Always, now, he seemed to be laughing at her, mocking her. He appeared an entirely different person from the man who had been so careful of her welfare during the eventful journey they had made together.

She lifted her head a little defiantly.

"No," she said, with significance. "I certainly don't understand—some people."

"Perhaps it's just as well," retorted Errington, unmoved.

Jerry, sensing electricity in the atmosphere, looked troubled and uncomfortable. He hadn't the faintest idea what they were talking about, but it was perfectly clear to him that everything was not quite as it should be between his beloved Max and this new friend, this jolly little girl with the wonderful eyes—just like a pair of stars, by Jove!—and, if rumour spoke truly, the even more wonderful voice.

Bashfully murmuring something about "going down to see if Miss de Gervais had come in yet," he bolted out of the room, leaving Max and Diana alone together.

Suddenly she turned and faced him.

"Why—why are you always so unkind to me?" she burst out, a little breathlessly.

He lifted his brows.

"I? . . . My dear Miss Quentin, I have no right to be either kind—or unkind—to you. That is surely the privilege of friends. And you showed me quite clearly, down at Crailing, that you did not intend to admit me to your friendship."

"I didn't," she exclaimed, and rushed on desperately. "Was it likely that I should feel anything but gratitude—and liking for any one who had done as much for me as you had?"

"You forget," he said quietly. "Afterwards—I transgressed. And you let me see that the transgression had wiped out my meritorious deeds—completely. It was quite the best thing that could happen," he added hastily, as she would have spoken. "I had no right, less right than any man on earth, to do—what I did. I abide by your decision."

The last words came slowly, meaningly. He was politely telling her that any overtures of friendship would be rejected.

Diana's pride lay in the dust, but she was determined he should not know it. With her head held high, she said stiffly:—

"I don't think I'll wait any longer for Adrienne. Will you tell her, please, that I've gone back to Brutton Square?"

"Brutton Square?" he repeated swiftly. "Do you live there?"

"Yes. Have you any objection?"

He disregarded her mocking query and continued:—

"A Miss Lermontof lives there. Is she, by any chance,

a friend of yours?" There seemed a hint of disapproval in his voice, and Diana countered with another question.

"Why? Do you think I ought not to be friends with her?"

"I? Oh, I don't think about it at all"—with a little half-foreign shrug of his shoulders. "Miss Quentin's choice of friends is no concern of mine."

Unbidden tears leaped into Diana's eyes at the cold satirical tones. Surely, surely he had hurt her enough for one day! Without a word she turned and made her way blindly out of the room and down the stairs. In the hall she almost ran into Jerry's arms.

"Oh, are you going?" he asked, in tones of disappointment.

"Yes, I'm afraid I mustn't wait any longer for Adrienne. I have some work to do when I get back."

Her voice shook a little, and Jerry, giving her a swift glance, could see that her lashes were wet and her eyes misty with tears.

"The brute!" he ejaculated mentally. "What's he done to her?"

Aloud he merely said:—

"Will you have a taxi?"

She nodded, and hailing one that chanced to be passing, he put her carefully into it.

"And—and I say," he said anxiously. "You didn't mind my talking to you this afternoon, did you, Miss Quentin? I made 'rather free,' as the servants say."

"No, of course I didn't mind," she replied warmly, her spirits rising a little. He was such a nice boy—the sort of boy one could be pals with. "You must come and see me at Brutton Square. Come to tea one day, will you?"

"*Won't I?*" he said heartily. "Good-bye." And the taxi swept away down the street.

Jerry returned to the drawing-room to find Errington staring moodily out of the window.

"I say, Max," he said, affectionately linking his arm in

that of the older man. "What had you been saying to upset that dear little person?"

"I?"

"Yes. She was—crying."

Jerry felt the arm against his own twitch, and continued relentlessly:—

"I believe you've been snubbing her. You know, old man, you have a sort of horribly lordly, touch-me-not air about you when you choose. But I don't see why you should choose with Miss Quentin. She's such an awfully good sort."

"Yes," agreed Errington. "Miss Quentin is quite charming."

"She thinks you don't like her," pursued Jerry, after a moment's pause.

"I—not like Miss Quentin? Absurd!"

"Well, that's what she thinks, anyway," persisted Jerry. "She told me so, and she seemed really sorry about it. She believes you don't want to be friends with her."

"Miss Quentin's friendship would be delightful. But—you don't understand, Jerry—it's one of the delights I must forego."

When Errington spoke with such a definite air of finality, his young secretary knew from experience that he might as well drop the subject. He could get nothing further out of Max, once the latter had adopted that tone over any matter. So Jerry, being wise in his generation, held his peace.

Suddenly Errington faced round and laid his hands on the boy's shoulder.

"Jerry," he said, and his voice shook with some deep emotion. "Thank God—thank Him every day of your life—that you're free and untrammelled. All the world's yours if you choose to take it. Some of us are shackled—our arms tied behind our backs. And oh, my God! How they ache to be free!"

The blue eyes were full of a keen anguish, the stern mouth

wry with pain. Never before had Jerry seen him thus with the mask off, and he felt as though he were watching a soul's agony unveiled.

"Max . . . dear old chap . . ." he stammered. "Can't I help?"

With an obvious effort Errington regained his composure, but his face was grey as he answered:—

"Neither you nor any one else, Jerry, boy. I must dree my weird, as the Scotch say. And that's the hard part of it—to be your own judge and jury. A man ought not to be compelled to play the double rôle of victim and executioner."

"And must you? . . . No way out?"

"None. Unless"—with a hard laugh—"the executioner throws up the game and—runs away, allowing the victim to escape. And that's impossible! . . . Impossible!" he reiterated vehemently, as though arguing against some inner voice.

"Let him rip," suggested Jerry. "Give the accused a chance!"

Errington laughed more naturally. He was rapidly regaining his usual self-possession.

"Jerry, you're a good pal, but a bad adviser. Get thee behind me."

Steps sounded on the stairs outside. Adrienne and Mrs. Adams had come back, and Errington turned composedly to greet them, the veil of reticence, momentarily swept aside by the surge of a sudden emotion, falling once more into its place.

CHAPTER XI

THE YEAR'S FRUIT

SPRING had slipped into summer, summer had given place again to winter, and once more April was come, with her soft breath blowing upon the sticky green buds and bidding them open, whilst daffodils and tulips, like slim sentinels, swayed above the brown earth in a riot of tender colour.

There is something very fresh and charming about London in April. The parks are aglow with young green, and the trees nod cheerfully to the little breeze that dances round them, whispering of summer. Even the houses perk up under their spruce new coats of paint, while every window that can afford it puts forth its carefully tended box of flowers. It is as though the old city suddenly awoke from her winter slumber and preened herself like a bird making its toilet; there is an atmosphere of renewal abroad—the very carters and cabmen seem conscious of it, and acknowledge it with good-humoured smiles and a flower worn jauntily in the buttonhole.

Diana leaned far out of the open window of her room at Brutton Square, sniffing up the air with its veiled, faint fragrance of spring, and gazing down in satisfaction at the delicate shimmer of green which clothed the trees and shrubs in the square below.

The realisation that a year had slipped away since last the trees had worn that tender green amazed her; it seemed almost incredible that twelve whole months had gone by since the day when she had first come to Brutton Square,

and she and Bunty had joked together about the ten commandments on the wall.

The year had brought both pleasure and pain—as most years do—pleasure in the friends she had gathered round her, Adrienne and Jerry and Bunty—even with Olga Lermontof an odd, rather one-sided friendship had sprung up, born of the circumstances which had knit their paths together—pain in the soreness which still lingered from the hurt that Errington had dealt her. Albeit, her life had been so filled with work and play, her mind so much occupied, that a surface skin, as it were, had formed over the wound, and it was only now and again that a sudden throb reminded her of its existence. Love had brushed her with his wings in passing, but she was hardly yet a fully awakened woman.

Nevertheless, the brief episodes of her early acquaintance with Errington had cut deep into a mind which had hitherto reflected nothing beyond the simple happenings of a girlhood passed at a country rectory, and the romantic flair of youth had given their memory a certain sacred niche in her heart. Some day Fate would come along and take them down from that shelf where they were stored, and dust them and present them to her afresh with a new significance.

For a brief moment Errington's kiss had roused her dormant womanhood, and then the events of daily life had crowded round and lulled it asleep once more. In swift succession there had followed the vivid interest of increasing musical study, the stirrings of ambition, and a whole world of new people to meet and rub shoulders with.

So that the end of her second year in London found Diana still little more than an impetuous, impulsive girl, possessed of a warm, undisciplined nature, and of an unconscious desire to fulfil her being along the most natural and easy lines, while in spirit she leaped forward to the time when she should be plunged into professional life.

The whole of her training under Baroni, with the big future that it held, tended to give her a somewhat egotistical

outlook, an instinctive feeling that everything must of necessity subordinate itself to her demands—an excellent foundation, no doubt, on which to build up a reputation as a famous singer in a world where people are apt to take you very much at your own valuation, but a poor preparation for the sacrifices and self-immolation that love not infrequently demands.

Above all else, this second year of study had brought in fullest measure the development and enriching of her voice. Baroni had schooled it with the utmost care, keeping always in view his purpose that the coming June should witness her début, and Diana, catching fire from his enthusiasm, had answered to every demand he had made upon her.

Her voice was now something to marvel at. It had matured into a rich contralto of amazing compass, and with a peculiar thrilling quality about it which gripped and held you almost as though some one had laid a hand upon your heart. Baroni hugged himself as he realised what a *furore* in the musical world this voice would create when at last he allowed the silence to be broken. Already there were whispers flying about of the wonderful contralto he was training, of whom it was rumoured that she would have the whole world at her feet from the moment that Baroni produced her.

The old *maestro* had his plans all cut and dried. Early in June, just when the season should be in full swing, there was to be a concert—a recital with only Kirolski, the Polish violinist, and Madame Berthe Louvigny, the famous French pianist, to assist. Those two names alone would inevitably draw a big crowd of all the musical people who mattered, and Diana's golden voice would do the rest.

This was to be the solitary concert for the season, but, to whet the appetite of society, Diana was also to appear at a single big reception—"Baroni won't look at anything less than a ducal house with Royalty present," as Jerry banteringly asserted—and then, while the world was still agape with interest and excitement, the singer was to be whisked

away to Crailing for three months' holiday, and to accept no more engagements until the winter. By that time, Baroni anticipated, people would be feverishly impatient for her reappearance, and the winter campaign would resolve itself into one long trail of glory.

Diana had been better able latterly to devote herself to her work, as Errington had been out of England for a time. So long as there was the likelihood of meeting him at any moment, her nerves had been more or less in a state of tension. There was that between them which made it impossible for her to regard him with the cool, indifferent friendship which he himself seemed so well able to assume. Despite herself, the sound of his voice, the touch of his hand, caused a curious little fluttering within her, like the flicker of a compass needle when it quivers to the north. If he entered the same room as herself, she was instantly aware of it, even though she might not chance to be looking in his direction at the moment. Indeed, her consciousness of him was so acute, so vital, that she sometimes wondered how it was possible that one person could mean so much to another and yet himself feel no reciprocal interest. And that he did feel none, his unvarying indifference of manner had at last convinced her.

But, even so, she was unable to banish him from her thoughts. This was the first day of her return to London after the Easter holidays, which she had spent as usual at Crailing Rectory, and already she was wondering rather wistfully whether Errington would be back in England during the summer. She felt that if only she could know *why* he had changed so completely towards her, why the interest she had so obviously awakened in him upon first meeting had waned and died, she might be able to thrust him completely out of her thoughts, and accept him merely as the casual acquaintance which was all he apparently claimed to be. But the restless, irritable longing to know, to have his incomprehensible behaviour explained, kept him ever in her mind.

Only once or twice had his name been mentioned between Olga Lermentof and herself, and on each occasion the former had repeated her caution, admonishing Diana to have nothing to do with him. It almost seemed as though she had some personal feeling of dislike towards him. Indeed Diana had accused her of it, only to be met with a quiet negative.

"No," she had replied serenely. "I don't dislike him. But I disapprove of much that he does."

"He is rather an attractive person," Diana ventured tentatively.

Olga Lermontof shot a keen glance at her.

"Well, I advise you not to give him your friendship," she said, "or"—sneeringly—"anything of greater value."

A sharp rat-tat at the door of her sitting-room recalled Diana's wandering thoughts to the present. She threw a glance of half-comic dismay at the state of her sitting-room—every available chair and table seemed to be strewn with the contents of the trunks she was unpacking—and then, with a resigned shrug of her shoulders, she crossed to the door and threw it open. Bunty was standing outside.

"What is it?" Diana was beginning, when she caught sight of a pleasant, ugly face appearing over little Miss Bunting's shoulder. "Oh, Jerry, is it you?" she exclaimed delightedly.

"He insisted on coming up, Miss Quentin," said Bunty, "although I told him you had only just arrived and would be in the middle of unpacking."

"I've got an important message to deliver," asserted Jerry, grinning, and shaking both Diana's hands exuberantly.

"Oh, never mind the unpacking," cried Diana, beginning to bundle the things off the tables and chairs back into one of the open trunks. "Bunty darling, help me to clear a space, and then go and order tea for two up here—and expense be blowed! Oh, and I'll put a match to the fire—it's quite cold enough. Come in, Jerry, and tell me all the news."

"I'll light that fire first," said Jerry, practically. "We can talk when Bunty darling brings our tea."

Miss Bunting shook her head at him and tried to frown, but as no one ever minded in the least what Jerry said, her effort at propriety was a failure, and she retreated to see about the tea, observing maliciously:—

"I'll send 'Mrs. Lawrence darling' up to talk to you, Mr. Leigh."

"Great Jehosaphat!"—Jerry flew after her to the door—"If you do, I'm off. That woman upsets my digestion—she's so beastly effusive. I thought she was going to kiss me last time."

Miss Bunting laughed as she disappeared downstairs.

"You're safe to-day," she threw back at him. "She's out."

Jerry returned to his smouldering fire and proceeded to encourage it with the bellows till, by the time the tea came up, the flames were leaping and crackling cheerfully in the little grate.

"And now," said Diana, as they settled themselves for a comfortable yarn over the teacups, "tell me all the news. Oh, by the way, what's your important message? I don't believe"—regarding him severely—"that you've got one at all. It was just an excuse."

"It wasn't, honour bright. It's from Miss de Gervais—she sent me round to see you expressly. You know, while Errington's away I call at her place for orders like the butcher's boy every morning. The boss asked me to look after her and make myself useful during his absence."

"Well," said Diana impatiently. "What's the message?" It did not interest her in the least to hear about the arrangements Max had made for Adrienne's convenience.

"Miss de Gervais is having a reception—'Hans Breitmann gif a barty,' you know——"

"Of course I know," broke in Diana irritably, "seeing that I'm asked to it."

Jerry continued patiently.

"And she wants you as a special favour to sing for her. As a matter of fact there are to be one or two bigwigs there

whom she thinks it might be useful for you to meet—influence, you know," he added, waving his hand expansively, "push, shove, backing, wire-pulling——"

"Oh, be quiet, Jerry," interrupted Diana, laughing in spite of herself. "It's no good, you know. It's dear of Adrienne to think of it, but Baroni won't let me do it. He hasn't allowed me to sing anywhere this last year."

"Doesn't want to take the cream off the milk, I suppose," said Jerry, with a grin. "But, as a matter of fact, he *has* given permission this time. Miss de Gervais went to see him about it herself, and he's consented. I've got a letter for you from the old chap"—producing it as he spoke.

"Adrienne is a marvel," said Diana, as she slit the flap of the envelope. "I'm sure Baroni would have refused any one else, but she seems to be able to twist him round her little finger."

"Dear Miss Quentin"—Baroni had written in his funny, cramped handwriting—"You may sing for Miss de Gervais. I have seen the list of guests, and it can do no harm—possibly a little good. Yours very sincerely, CARLO BARONI."

"Miss de Gervais must have a 'way' with her," said Jerry meditatively. "I observe that even my boss always does her bidding like a lamb."

Diana poured herself out a second cup of tea before she asked negligently:—

"When's your 'boss' returning? It seems to me he's allowing you to live the life of the idle rich. Will he be back for Adrienne's reception?"

"No. About a week afterwards, I expect."

"Where's he been?"

"Oh, all over the shop—I've had letters from him from half the capitals in Europe. But he's been in Russia longest of all, I think."

"Russia?"—musingly. "I suppose he isn't a Russian by any chance?"

"I've never asked him," returned Jerry shortly.

"He is certainly not pure English. Look at his high

cheek-bones. And his temperament isn't English, either," she added, with a secret smile.

Jerry remained silent.

"Don't you think it's rather funny that we none of us know anything about him?—I mean beyond the mere fact that his name is Errington and that he's a well-known playwright."

"Why do you want to know more?" growled Jerry.

"Well, I think there is something behind, something odd about him. Olga Lermontof is always hinting that there is."

"Look here, Diana," said Jerry, getting rather red. "Don't let's talk about Errington. You know we always get shirty with each other when we do. I'm not going to pry into his private concerns—and as for Miss Lermontof, she's the type of woman who simply revels in making mischief."

"But it *is* funny Mr. Errington should be so—so reserved about himself," persisted Diana. "Hasn't he ever told you anything?"

"No, he has not," replied Jerry curtly. "Nor should I ever ask him to. I'm quite content to take him as I find him."

"All the same, I believe Miss Lermontof knows something about him—something not quite to his credit."

"I swear she doesn't," burst out Jerry violently. "Just because he doesn't choose to blab out all his private affairs to the world at large, that black-browed female Tartar must needs imagine he has something to conceal. It's damnable! I'd stake my life Errington's as straight as a die—and always has been."

"You're a good friend, Jerry," said Diana, rather wistfully.

"Yes, I am," he returned stoutly. "And so are you, as a rule. I can't think why you're so beastly unfair to Errington."

"You forget," she said swiftly, "he's not my friend. And —perhaps—he hasn't always been quite fair to me."

"Oh, well, let's drop the subject now"—Jerry wriggled his broad shoulders uncomfortably. "Tell me, how are the Rector and—and Miss Stair?"

The previous summer Jerry had spent a week at Red Gables, and had made Joan's acquaintance. Apparently the two had found each other's society somewhat absorbing, for Adrienne had laughingly declared that she didn't quite know whether Jerry were really staying at Red Gables or at the Rectory.

"Pobs and Joan sent all sorts of nice messages for you," said Diana, smiling a little. "They're both coming up to town for my recital, you know."

"Are they?"—eagerly. "Hurrah! . . . We must go on the bust when it's over. The concert will be in the afternoon, won't it?" Diana nodded. "Then we must have a commemoration dinner in the evening. Oh, why am I not a millionaire? Then I'd stand you all dinner at the 'Carlton.'"

He was silent a moment, then went on quickly:

"I shall have to make money somehow. A man can't marry on my screw as a secretary, you know."

Diana hastily concealed a smile.

"I didn't know you were contemplating matrimony," she observed.

"I'm not"—reddening a little. "But—well, one day I expect I shall. It's quite the usual sort of thing—done by all the best people. But it can't be managed on two hundred a year! And that's the net amount of my princely income."

"But I thought that your people had plenty of money?"

"So they have—trucks of it. Coal-trucks!"—with a debonair reference to the fact that Leigh *père* was a wealthy coal-owner. "But, you see, when I was having my fling, which came to such an abrupt end at Monte, the governor

got downright ratty with me—kicked up no end of a shine. Told me not to darken his doors again, and that I might take my own road to the devil for all he cared, and generally played the part of the outraged parent. I must say," he added ingenuously, "that the old boy had paid my debts and set me straight a good many times before he *did* cut up rusty."

"You're the only child, aren't you?" Jerry nodded. "Oh, well then, of course he'll come round in time—they always do. I shouldn't worry a bit if I were you."

"Well," said Jerry hesitatingly, "I did think that perhaps if I went to him some day with a certificate of good character and steady work from Errington, it might smooth matters a bit. I'm fond of the governor, you know, in spite of his damn bad temper—and it must be rather rotten for the old chap living all by himself at Abbotsleigh."

"Yes, it must. One fine day you'll make it up with him, Jerry, and he'll slay the fatted calf and you'll have no end of a good time."

Just then the clock of a neighbouring church chimed the half-hour, and Jerry jumped to his feet in a hurry.

"My hat! Half-past six! I must be toddling. What a squanderer of unconsidered hours you are, Diana! . . . Well, by-bye, old girl; it's good to see you back in town. Then I may tell Miss de Gervais that you'll sing for her?"

Diana nodded.

"Of course I will. It will be a sort of preliminary canter for my recital."

"And when that event comes off, you'll sail past the post lengths in front of any one else."

And with that Jerry took his departure. A minute later Diana heard the front door bang, and from the window watched him striding along the street. He looked back, just before he turned the corner, and waved his hand cheerily.

"Nice boy!" she murmured, and then set about her unpacking in good earnest.

CHAPTER XII

MAX ERRINGTON'S RETURN

IT was the evening of Adrienne's reception, and Diana was adding a few last touches to her toilette for the occasion. Bunty had been playing the part of lady's maid, and now they both stood back to observe the result of their labours.

"You do look nice!" remarked Miss Bunting, in a tone of satisfaction.

Diana glanced half-shyly into the long glass panel of the wardrobe door. There was something vivid and arresting about her to-night, as though she were tremulously aware that she was about to take the first step along her road as a public singer. A touch of excitement had added an unwonted brilliance to her eyes, while a faint flush came and went swiftly in her cheeks.

Bunty, without knowing quite what it was that appealed, was suddenly conscious of the sheer physical charm of her.

"You are rather wonderful," she said consideringly.

A sense of the sharp contrast between them smote Diana almost painfully—she herself, young and radiant, holding in her slender throat a key that would unlock the doors of the whole world, and beside her the little boarding-house help, equally young, and with all youth's big demands pent up within her, yet ahead of her only a drab vista of other boarding-houses—some better, some worse, mayhap—but always eating the bread of servitude, her only possible way of escape by means of matrimony with some little underpaid clerk.

And what had Bunty done to deserve so poor a lot? Hers

was unquestionably by far the finer character of the two, as Diana frankly admitted to herself. In truth, the apparent injustices of fate made a riddle hard to read.

"And you"—Diana spoke impulsively—"you are the dearest thing imaginable. I wish you were coming with me."

"I should like to hear you sing in those big rooms," acknowledged Bunty, a little wistfully.

"When I give my recital you shall have a seat in the front row," Diana promised, as she picked up her gloves and music-case.

A tap sounded at the door.

"Are you ready?" inquired Olga Lermontof's voice from outside.

Bunty opened the door.

"Oh, come in, Miss Lermontof. Yes, Miss Quentin is quite ready, and I must run away now."

Olga came in and stood for a moment looking at Diana. Then she deliberately stepped close to her, so that their reflections showed side by side in the big mirror.

"Black and white angels—quite symbolical," she observed, with a short laugh.

She was dressed entirely in black, and her sable figure made a startling foil to Diana's slender whiteness.

"Nervous?" she asked laconically, noticing the restless tapping of the other's foot.

"I believe I am," replied Diana, smiling a little.

"You needn't be."

"I should be terrified if anyone else were accompanying me. But, somehow, I think you always give me confidence when I'm singing."

"Probably because I'm always firmly convinced of your ultimate success."

"No, no. It isn't that. It's because you're the most perfect accompanist any one could have."

Miss Lermontof swept her a mocking curtsey.

"*Mille remercîments!*" Then she laughed rather oddly.

"I believe you still have no conception of the glory of your voice, you queer child."

"Is it really so good?" asked Diana, with the genuine artist's craving to be reassured.

Olga Lermontof looked at her speculatively.

"I suppose you can't understand it at present," she said, after a pause. "You will, though, when you've given a few concerts and seen its effect upon the audience. Now, come along; it's time we started."

They found Adrienne's rooms fairly full, but not in the least overcrowded. The big double doors between the two drawing-rooms had been thrown open, and the tide of people flowed back and forth from one room to the other. A small platform had been erected at one end, and as Diana and Miss Lermontof entered, a French *diseuse* was just ascending it preparatory to reciting in her native tongue.

The recitation—vivid, accompanied by the direct, expressive gesture for which Mademoiselle de Bonvouloir was so famous—was followed at appropriate intervals by one or two items of instrumental music, and then Diana found herself mounting the little platform, and a hush descended anew upon the throng of people, the last eager chatterers twittering into silence as Olga Lermontof struck the first note of the song's prelude.

Diana was conscious of a small sea of faces all turned towards her, most of them unfamiliar. She could just see Adrienne smiling at her from the back of the room, and near the double doors Jerry was standing next a tall man whose back was towards the platform as he bent to move aside a chair that was in the way. The next moment he had straightened himself and turned round, and with a sudden, almost agonising leap of the heart Diana saw that it was Max Errington.

He had come back! After that first wild throb her heart seemed to stand still, the room grew dark around her, and she swayed a little where she stood.

"Nervous!" murmured one man to another, beneath his breath.

Olga Lermontof had finished the prelude, and, finding that Diana had failed to come in, composedly recommenced it. Diana was dimly conscious of the repetition, and then the mist gradually cleared away from before her eyes, and this time, when the accompanist played the bar of her entry, the habit of long practice prevailed and she took up the voice part with accurate precision.

The hush deepened in the room. Perhaps the very emotion under which Diana was labouring added to the charm of her wonderful voice—gave it an indescribable appeal which held the critical audience, familiar with all the best that the musical world could offer, spell-bound.

When she ceased, and the last exquisite note had vibrated into silence, the enthusiasm of the applause that broke out would have done justice to a theatre pit audience rather than to a more or less blasé society crowd. And when the whisper went round that this was to be her only song—that Baroni had laid his veto upon her singing twice—the clapping and demands for an encore were redoubled.

Olga Lermontof's eyes, roaming over the room, rested at last upon the face of Max Errington, and with the recollection of Diana's hesitancy at the beginning of the song a brief smile flashed across her face.

"What shall I do?" Diana, who had bowed repeatedly without stemming the applause, turned to the accompanist, a little flushed with the thrill of this first public recognition of her gifts.

"Sing 'The Haven of Memory,'" whispered Olga.

It was a sad little love lyric which Baroni himself had set to music specially for the voice of his favourite pupil, and as Diana's low rich notes took up the plaintive melody, the audience settled itself down with a sigh of satisfaction to listen once more.

Do you remember
  Our great love's pure unfolding,
The troth you gave,
  And prayed for God's upholding,
    Long and long ago?

Out of the past
  A dream—and then the waking—
Comes back to me,
  Of love and love's forsaking
    Ere the summer waned.

Ah! let me dream
  That still a little kindness
Dwelt in the smile
  That chid my foolish blindness,
    When you said good-bye.

Let me remember,
  When I am very lonely,
How once your love
  But crowned and blessed me only,
    Long and long ago! *

The haunting melody ceased, and an infinitesimal pause ensued before the clapping broke out. It was rather subdued this time; more than one pair of eyes were looking at the singer through the grey mist of memory.

An old lady with very white hair and a reputation for a witty tongue that had been dipped in vinegar came up to Diana as she descended from the platform.

"My dear," she said, and the keen old eyes were suddenly blurred and dim. "I want to thank you. One is apt to forget—when one is very lonely—that we've most of us worn love's crown just once—if only for a few moments of our lives. . . . And it's good to be reminded of it, even though it may hurt a little."

"That was the Dowager Duchess of Linfield," murmured Olga, when the old lady had moved away again. "They say she was madly in love with an Italian opera singer in

* This song, "The Haven of Memory," has been set to music by Isador Epstein: published by G. Ricordi & Co., 265 Regent Street, W.

the days of her youth. But, of course, at that time he was quite unknown and altogether ineligible, so she married the late Duke, who was old enough to be her father. By the time he died the opera singer was dead, too."

That was Diana's first taste of the power of a beautiful voice to unlock the closed chambers of the heart where lie our hidden memories—the long pain of years, sometimes unveiled to those whose gifts appeal directly to the emotions. It sobered her a little. This, then, she thought, this leaf of rue that seemed to bring the sadness of the world so close, was interwoven with the crown of laurel.

"Won't you say how do you do to me, Miss Quentin? I've been deputed by Miss de Gervais to see that you have some supper after breaking all our hearts with your singing."

Diana, roused from her thoughts, looked up to see Max Errington regarding her with the old, faintly amused mockery in his eyes.

She shook hands.

"I don't believe you've got a heart to break," she retorted, smiling.

"Oh, mine was broken long before I heard you sing. Otherwise I would not answer for the consequences of that sad little song of yours. What is it called?"

"'The Haven of Memory,'" replied Diana, as Errington skilfully piloted her to a small table standing by itself in an alcove of the supper-room.

"What a misleading name! Wouldn't 'The *Hell* of Memory' be more appropriate—more true to life?"

"I suppose," answered Diana soberly, "that it might appear differently to different people."

"You mean that the garden of memory may have several aspects—like a house? I'm afraid mine faces north. Yours, I expect, is full of spring flowers"—smiling a little quizzically.

"With the addition of a few weeds," she answered.

"Weeds? Surely not? Who planted them there?" His keen, penetrating eyes were fixed on her face.

Diana was silent, her fingers trifling nervously with the salt in one of the little silver cruets, first piling it up into a tiny mound, and then flattening it down again and patterning its surface with criss-cross lines.

There was no one near. In the alcove Errington had chosen, the two were completely screened from the rest of the room by a carved oak pillar and velvet curtains.

He laid his hand over the restless fingers, holding them in a sure, firm clasp that brought back vividly to her mind the remembrance of that day when he had helped her up the steps of the quayside at Crailing.

"Diana"—his voice deepened a little—"am I responsible for any of the weeds in your garden?"

Her hand trembled a little under his. After a moment she threw back her head defiantly and met his glance.

"Perhaps there's a stinging-nettle or two labelled with your name," she answered lightly. "The *Nettlewort Erringtonia,*" she added, smiling.

Diana was growing up rapidly.

"I suppose," he said slowly, "you wouldn't believe me if I told you that I'm sorry—that I'd uproot them if I could?"

She looked away from him in silence. He could not see her expression, only the pure outline of her cheek and a little pulse that was beating rapidly in her throat.

With a sudden, impetuous movement he released her hand, almost flinging it from him.

"My application for the post of gardener is refused, I see," he said. "And quite rightly, too. It was great presumption on my part. After all"—with bitter mockery—"what are a handful of nettles in the garden of a *prima donna?* They'll soon be stifled beneath the wreaths of laurel and bouquets that the world will throw you. You'll never even feel their sting."

"You are wrong," said Diana, very low, "quite wrong. They *have* stung me. Mr. Errington"—and as she turned to him he saw that her eyes were brimming with tears—"why can't we be friends? You—you have helped me so

many times that I don't understand why you treat me now . . . almost as though I were an enemy?"

"An enemy? . . . *You!*"

"Yes," she said steadily.

He was silent.

"I don't wish to be," she went on, an odd wistfulness in her voice. "Can't we—be friends?"

Errington pushed his plate aside abruptly.

"You don't know what you're offering me," he said, in hurrying tones. "If I could only take it! . . . But I've no right to make friends—no right. I think I've been singled out by fate to live alone."

"Yet you are friends with Miss de Gervais," she said quickly.

"I write plays for her," he replied evasively. "So that we are obliged to see a good deal of each other."

"And apparently you don't want to be friends with me."

"There can be little in common between a mere quill-driver and—a *prima donna*."

She turned on him swiftly.

"You seem to forget that at present you are a famous dramatist, while I am merely a musical student."

"You divested yourself of that title for ever this evening," he returned. "It was no 'student' who sang 'The Haven of Memory.'"

"All the same I shall have to study for a long time yet, Baroni tells me,"—smiling a little.

"In that sense a great artiste is always a student. But what I meant by saying that a mere writer has no place in a prima donna's life was that, whereas my work is more or less a hobby, and my little bit of 'fame'—as you choose to call it—merely a side-issue, *your* work will be your whole existence. You will live for it entirely—your art and the world's recognition of it will absorb every thought. There will be no room in your life for the friendship of insignificant people like myself."

"Try me," she said demurely.

He swung round on her with a sudden fierceness.

"By God!" he exclaimed. "If you knew the temptation . . . if you knew how I long to take what you offer!"

She smiled at him—a slow, sweet smile that curved her mouth, and climbing to her eyes lit them with a soft radiance.

"Well?" she said quietly. "Why not?"

He got up abruptly, and going to the window, stood with his back to her, looking out into the night.

She watched him consideringly. Intuitively she knew that he was fighting a battle with himself. She had always been conscious of the element of friction in their intercourse. This evening it had suddenly crystallised into a definite realisation that although this man desired to be her friend —Truth, at the bottom of her mental well, whispered perhaps even something more—he was caught back, restrained by the knowledge of some obstacle, some hindrance to their friendship of which she was entirely ignorant.

She waited in silence.

Presently he turned back to her, and she gathered from his expression that he had come to a decision. In the moment that elapsed before he spoke she had time to be aware of a sudden, almost breathless anxiety, and instinctively she let her lids fall over her eyes lest he should read and understand the apprehension in them.

"Diana."

His voice came gently and gravely to her ears. With an effort she looked up and found him regarding her with eyes from which all the old ironical mockery had fled. They were very steady and kind—kinder than she had ever believed it possible for them to be. Her throat contracted painfully, and she stretched out her hand quickly, pleadingly, like a child.

He took it between both his, holding it with the delicate care one accords a flower, as though fearful of hurting it.

"Diana, I'm going to accept—what you offer me. Heaven knows I've little right to! There are . . . worlds between

you and me. . . . But if a man dying of thirst in the desert finds a pool—a pool of crystal water—is he to be blamed if he drinks—if he quenches his thirst for a moment? He knows the pool is not his—never can be his. And when the rightful owner comes along—why, he'll go away, back to the loneliness of the desert again. But he'll always remember that his lips have once drunk from the pool—and been refreshed."

Diana spoke very low and wistfully.

"He—he must go back to the desert?"

Errington bent his head.

"He must go back," he answered. "The gods have decreed him outcast from life's pleasant places; he is ordained to wander alone—always."

Diana drew her hand suddenly away from his, and the hasty movement knocked over the little silver salt-cellar on the table, scattering the salt on the cloth between them.

"Oh!" she cried, flushing with distress. "I've spilled the salt between us—we shall quarrel."

The electricity in the atmosphere was gone, and Errington laughed gaily.

"I'm not afraid. See,"—he filled their glasses with wine—"let's drink to our compact of friendship."

He raised his glass, clinking it gently against hers, and they drank. But as Diana replaced her glass on the table, she looked once more in a troubled way at the little heap of salt that lay on the white cloth.

"I wish I hadn't spilled it," she said uncertainly. "It's an ill omen. Some day we shall quarrel."

Her eyes were grave and brooding, as though some prescience of evil weighed upon her.

Errington lifted his glass, smiling.

"Far be the day," he said lightly.

But her eyes, meeting his, were still clouded with foreboding.

CHAPTER XIII

THE FRIEND WHO STOOD BY

AS the day fixed for her recital approached, Diana became a prey to intermittent attacks of nerves.

"Supposing I should fail?" she would sometimes exclaim, in a sudden spasm of despair.

Then Baroni would reply quite contentedly:—

"My dear Mees Quentin, you will not fail. God has given you the instrument, and I, Baroni, I haf taught you how to use it. *Gran Dio!* Fail!" This last accompanied by a snort of contempt.

Or it might be Olga Lermontof to whom Diana would confide her fears. She, equally with the old *maestro,* derided the possibility of failure, and there was something about her cool assurance of success that always sufficed to steady Diana's nerves, at least for the time being.

"As I have you to accompany me," Diana told her one day, when she was ridiculing the idea of failure, "I may perhaps get through all right. I simply *lean* on you when I'm singing. I feel like a boat floating on deep water—almost as though I couldn't sink."

"Well, you can't." Miss Lermontof spoke with conviction. "I shan't break down—I could play everything you sing blindfold!—and your voice is . . . Oh, well"—hastily—"I can't talk about your voice. But I believe I could forgive you anything in the world when you sing."

Diana stared at her in surprise. She had no idea that Olga was particularly affected by her singing.

"It's rather absurd, isn't it?" continued the Russian, a mocking light in her eyes that somehow reminded Diana

of Max Errington. "But there it is. A little triangular box in your throat and a breath of air from your lungs—and immediately you hold one's heart in your hands!"

Alan Stair and Joan came up to London the day before that on which the recital was to take place, since Diana had insisted that they must fix their visit so that the major part of it should follow, instead of preceding the concert.

"For"—as she told them—"if I fail, it will be nice to have you two dear people to console me, and if I succeed, I shall be just in the right mood to take a holiday and play about with you both. Whereas until my fate is sealed, one way or the other, I shall be like a bear with a sore head."

But when the day actually arrived her nervousness completely vanished, and she drove down to the hall composedly as though she were about to appear at her fiftieth concert rather than at her first. Olga Lermontof regarded her with some anxiety. She would have preferred her to show a little natural nervous excitement beforehand; there would be less danger of a sudden attack of stage-fright at the last moment.

Baroni was in the artistes' room when they arrived, outwardly cool, but inwardly seething with mingled pride and excitement and vicarious apprehension. He hurried forward to greet them, shaking Diana by both hands and then leading her up to the great French pianist, Madame Berthe Louvigny.

The latter was a tall, grave-looking woman, with a pair of the most lustrous brown eyes Diana had ever seen. They seemed to glow with a kind of inward fire under the wide brow revealed beneath the sweep of her dark hair.

"So thees ees your worder-pupil, Signor," she said, her smile radiating kindness and good-humour. "Mademoiselle, I weesh you all the success that I know Signor Baroni hopes for you."

She talked very rapidly, with a strong foreign accent, and her gesture was so expressive that one felt it was almost superfluous to add speech to the quick, controlled movement.

Hands, face, shoulders—she seemed to speak with her whole body, yet without conveying any impression of restlessness. There was not a single meaningless movement; each added point to the rapid flow of speech, throwing it into vivid relief like the shading of a picture.

While she was still chatting to Diana, a slender man with bright hair tossed back over a finely shaped head came into the artistes' room, carrying in his hand a violin-case which he deposited on the table with as much care as though it were a baby. He shook hands with Olga Lermontof, and then Baroni swept him into his net.

"Kirolski, let me present you to Miss Quentin. She will one day stand amongst singers where you stand amongst the world's violinists."

Kirolski bowed, and glanced smilingly from Baroni to Diana.

"I've no doubt Miss Quentin will do more than that," he said. "A friend of mine heard her sing at Miss de Gervais' reception not long ago, and he has talked of nothing else ever since. I am very pleased to meet you, Miss Quentin." And he bowed again.

Diana was touched by the simple, unaffected kindness of the two great artistes who were to assist at her recital. It surprised her a little; she had anticipated the disparaging, almost inimical attitude towards a new star so frequently credited to professional musicians, and had steeled herself to meet it with indifference. She forgot that when you are at the top of the tree there is little cause for envy or heart-burning, and graciousness becomes an easy habit. It is in the struggle to reach the top that the ugly passions leap into life.

Presently there came sounds of clapping from the body of the hall; some of the audience were growing impatient, and the news that there was a packed house filtered into the artistes' room. Almost as in a dream Diana watched Kirolski lift his violin from its cushiony bed and run his fingers lightly over the strings in a swift arpeggio. Then

he tightened his bow and rubbed the resin along its length of hair, while Olga Lermontof looked through a little pile of music for the duet for violin and piano with which the recital was to commence.

The outbreaks of clapping from in front grew more persistent, culminating in a veritable roar of welcome as Kirolski led the pianist on to the platform. Then came a breathless, expectant silence, broken at last by the stately melody of the first movement.

To Diana it seemed as though the duet were very quickly over, and although the applause and recalls were persistent, no encore was given. Then she saw Olga Lermontof mounting the platform steps preparatory to accompanying Kirolski's solo, and with a sudden violent reaction from her calm composure she realised that the following item on the programme must be the first group of her own songs.

For an instant the room swayed round her, then with a little gasp she clutched Baroni's arm.

"I can't do it! . . . I can't do it!" Her voice was shaking, and every drop of colour had drained away from her face.

Baroni turned instantly, his eyes full of concern.

"My dear, but that is nonsense. You *cannot help* doing it—you know those songs inside out and upside down. You need haf no fear. Do not think about it at all. Trust your voice—it will sing what it knows."

But Diana still clung helplessly to his arm, shivering from head to foot, and Madame de Louvigny hurried across the room and joined her assurances to those of the old *maestro*. She also added a liqueur-glass of brandy to her soothing, encouraging little speeches, but Diana refused the former with a gesture of repugnance, and seemed scarcely to hear the latter. She was dazed by sheer nervous terror, and stood there with her hands tightly clasped together, her body rigid and taut with misery.

Baroni was nearly demented. If she should fail to regain her nerve the whole concert would be a disastrous fiasco.

Possible headlines from the morrow's newspapers danced before his eyes: "Nervous Collapse of Miss Diana Quentin," "Signor Baroni's New Prima Donna Fails to Materialise."

"*Diavolo!*" he exclaimed distractedly. "But what shall we do? What shall we do?"

"What is the matter?"

At the sound of the cool, level tones the little agitated group of three in the artistes' room broke asunder, and Baroni hurried towards the newcomer.

"Mr. Errington, we are in despair——" And with a gesture towards Diana he briefly explained the predicament.

Max nodded, his keen eyes considering the shrinking figure leaning against the wall.

"Don't worry, Baroni," he said quietly. "I'll pull her round." Then, as a burst of applause crashed out from the hall, he whispered hastily: "Get Kirolski to give an encore. It will allow her a little more time."

Baroni nodded, and a minute or two later the audience was cheering the violinist's reappearance, whilst Errington strode across the room to Diana's side.

"How d'you do?" he said, holding out his hand exactly as though nothing in the world were the matter. "I thought you'd allow me to come round and wish you luck, so here I am."

He spoke in such perfectly normal, everyday tones that unconsciously Diana's rigid muscles relaxed and she extended her hand in response.

"I'm feeling sick with fright," she replied, giving him a wavering smile.

Max laughed easily.

"Of course. Otherwise you wouldn't be the artiste that you are. But it will all go the moment you're on the platform."

She looked up at him with a faint hope in her eyes.

"Do you really think so?" she whispered.

"I'm sure. It always does," he lied cheerfully. "I'll tell you who is far more nervous than you are, and that's the Rector. Miss Stair and Jerry were almost forcibly holding him down in his seat when I left them. He's disposed to bolt out of the hall and await results at the hotel."

Diana laughed outright.

"How like him! Poor Pobs!"

"You'd better give him a special smile when you get on the platform to reassure him," continued Max, his blue eyes smiling down at her.

The violin solo had drawn to a close—Kirolski had already returned a third time to bow his acknowledgments—and Errington was relieved to see that the look of strain had gone out of her face, although she still appeared rather pale and shaken.

One or two friends of the violinist's were coming in at the door of the artistes' room as Olga Lermontof preceded him down the platform steps. There was a little confusion, the sound of a fall, and simultaneously some one inadvertently pushed the door to. The next minute the accompanist was the centre of a small crowd of anxious, questioning people. She had tripped and stumbled to her knees on the threshold of the room, and, as she instinctively stretched out her hand to save herself, the door had swung back trapping two of her fingers in the hinge.

A hubbub of dismay arose. Olga was white with pain, and her hand was so badly squeezed and bruised that it was quite obvious she would be unable to play any more that day.

"I'm so sorry, Miss Quentin," she murmured faintly.

In her distress about the accident, Diana had for the moment overlooked the fact that it would affect her personally, but now, as Olga's words reminded her that the accompanist on whom she placed such utter reliance would be forced to cede her place to a substitute, her former nervousness returned with redoubled force. It began to look as

though she would really be unable to appear, and Baroni wrung his hands in despair.

It was a moment for speedy action. The audience were breaking into impatient clapping, and from the back of the hall came an undertone of stamping, and the sound of umbrellas banging on the floor. Errington turned swiftly to Diana.

"Will you trust me with the accompaniments?" he said, his blue eyes fixed on hers.

"You?" she faltered.

"Yes. I swear I won't fail you." His voice dropped to a lower note, but his dominating eyes still held her. "See, you offered me your friendship. Trust me now. Let me 'stand by,' as a friend should."

There was an instant's pause, then suddenly Diana bent her head in acquiescence.

"Thank heaven! thank heaven!" exclaimed Baroni, wringing Max's hand. "You haf saved the situation, Mr. Errington."

A minute later Diana found herself mounting the platform steps, her hand in Max's. His close, firm clasp steadied and reassured her. Again she was aware of that curious sense of well-being, as of leaning on some sure, unfailing strength, which the touch of his hand had before inspired.

As he led her on to the platform she met his eyes, full of a kind good-comradeship and confidence.

"All right?" he whispered cheerfully.

A little comforting warmth crept about her heart. She was not alone, facing all those hundreds of curious, critical eyes in the hall below; there was a friend "standing by."

She nodded to him reassuringly, suddenly conscious of complete self-mastery. She no longer feared those ranks of upturned faces, row upon row, receding into shadow at the further end of the hall, and she bowed composedly in response to the applause that greeted her. Then she heard Max strike the opening chord of the song, and a minute later

the big concert-hall was thrilling to the matchless beauty of her voice, as it floated out on to the waiting stillness.

The five songs of the group followed each other in quick succession, the clapping that broke out between each of them only checking so that the next one might be heard, but when the final number had been given, and the last note had drifted tenderly away into silence, the vast audience rose to its feet almost as one man, shouting and clapping and waving in a tumultuous outburst of enthusiasm.

Diana stood quite still, almost frightened by the uproar, until Max touched her arm and escorted her off the platform.

In the artistes' room every one crowded round her pouring out congratulations. Baroni seized both her hands and kissed them; then he kissed her cheek, the tears in his eyes. And all the time came the thunder of applause from the auditorium, beating up in steady, rhythmic waves of sound.

"Go!—Go back, my child, and bow." Baroni impelled her gently towards the door. *"Gran Dio!* What a success! . . . What a voice of heaven!"

Rather nervously, Diana mounted the platform once more, stepping forward a little shyly; her cheeks were flushed, and her wonderful eyes shone like grey stars. A fillet of pale green leaves bound her smoke-black hair, and the slender, girlish figure in its sea-green gown, touched here and there with gold embroidery, reminded one of spring, and the young green and gold of daffodils.

Instantly the applause redoubled. People were surging forward towards the platform, pressing round an unfortunate usher who was endeavouring to hand up a sheaf of roses to the singer. Diana bowed, and bowed again. Then she stooped and accepted the roses, and a fresh burst of clapping ensued. A wreath of laurel, and a huge bunch of white heather, for luck, followed the sheaf of roses, and finally, her arms full of flowers, smiling, bowing still, she escaped from the platform.

Back again in the artistes' room, she found that a number of her friends in front had come round to offer their congratulations. Alan Stair and Joan, Jerry, and Adrienne de Gervais were amongst them, and Diana at once became the centre of a little excited throng, all laughing and talking and shaking her by the hand. Every one seemed to be speaking at once, and behind it all still rose and fell the cannonade of shouts and clapping from the hall.

Four times Diana returned to the platform to acknowledge the tremendous ovation which her singing had called forth, and at length, since Baroni forbade an encore until after her second group of songs, Madame de Louvigny went on to give her solo.

"They weel not want to hear me—after you, Mees Quentin," she said laughingly.

But the British public is always very faithful to its favourites, and the audience, realising at last that the new singer was not going to bestow an encore, promptly exerted itself to welcome the French pianist in a befitting manner.

When Diana reappeared for her second group of songs the excitement was intense. Whilst she was singing a pin could have been heard to fall; it almost seemed as though the huge concourse of people held its breath so that not a single note of the wonderful voice should be missed, and when she ceased there fell a silence—that brief silence, like a sigh of ecstasy, which is the greatest tribute that any artiste can receive.

Then, with a crash like thunder, the applause broke out once more, and presently, reappearing with the sheaf of roses in her hand, Diana sang "The Haven of Memory" as an encore.

Let me remember,
When I am very lonely,
How once your love
But crowned and blessed me only,
Long and long ago.

The plaintive rhythm died away and the clapping which succeeded it was quieter, less boisterous, than hitherto. Some people were crying openly, and many surreptitiously wiped away a tear or so in the intervals of applauding. The audience was shaken by the tender, sorrowful emotion of the song, its big, sentimental British heart throbbing to the haunting quality of the most beautiful voice in Europe.

Diana herself had tears in her eyes. She was experiencing for the first time the passionate exultation born of the knowledge that she could sway the hearts of a multitude by the sheer beauty of her singing—an abiding recompense bestowed for all the sacrifices which art demands from those who learn her secrets.

Her fingers, gripping with unconscious intensity the flowers she held, detached a white rose from the sheaf, and it had barely time to reach the floor before a young man from the audience, eager-eyed, his face pale with excitement, sprang forward and snatched it up from beneath her feet.

In an instant there was an uproar. Men and women lost their heads and clambered up on to the platform, pressing round the singer, besieging her for a spray of leaves or a flower from the sheaf she carried. Some even tried to secure a bit of the gold embroidery from off her gown by way of memento.

"Oh, please . . . please . . ."

A crowd that is overwrought, either by anger or enthusiasm, is a difficult thing to handle, and Diana retreated desperately, frightened by the storm she had evoked. One man was kneeling beside her, rapturously kissing the hem of her gown, and the eager, excited faces, the outstretched hands, the vision of the surging throng below, and the tumult and clamour that filled the concert-hall terrified her.

Suddenly a strong arm intervened between her and the group of enthusiasts who were flocking round her, and she found that she was being quietly drawn aside into safety. Max Errington's tall form had interposed itself between

her and her too eager worshippers. With a little gasp of relief she let him lead her down the steps of the platform and back into the comparative calm of the artistes' room, while two of the ushers hurried forward and dispersed the memento-seekers, shepherding them back into the hall below, so that the concert might continue.

The latter part of the programme was heard with attention, but not even the final *duo* for violin and piano, exquisite though it was, succeeded in rousing the audience to a normal pitch of fervour again. Emotion and enthusiasm were alike exhausted, and now that Diana's share in the recital was over, the big assemblage of people listened to the remaining numbers much as a child, tired with play, may listen to a lullaby—placidly appreciative, but without overwhelming excitement.

"Well, what did I tell you?" demanded Jerry, triumphantly, of the little party of friends who gathered together for tea in Diana's sitting-room, when at length the great event of the afternoon was over. "What did I tell you? . . . I said Diana would just romp past the post—all the others nowhere. And behold! It came to pass."

"It's a good thing Madame Louvigny and Kirolski can't hear you," observed Joan sagely. "They've probably got quite nice natures, but you'd strain the forbearance of an early Christian martyr, Jerry. Besides, you needn't be so fulsome to Diana; it isn't good for her."

Jerry retorted with spirit, and the two drifted into a pleasant little wrangle—the kind of sparring match by which youths and maidens frequently endeavour to convince themselves, and the world at large, of the purely Platonic nature of their sentiments.

Bunty, who had rejoiced in her promised seat in the front row at the concert, was hurrying to and fro, a maid-servant in attendance, bringing in tea, while Mrs. Lawrence, who had also been the recipient of a complimentary ticket, looked in for a few minutes to felicitate the heroine of the day.

She mentally patted herself on the back for the discernment she had evinced in making certain relaxations of her stringent rules in favour of this particular boarder. It was quite evident that before long Miss Quentin would be distinctly a "personage," shedding a delectable effulgence upon her immediate surroundings, and Mrs. Lawrence was firmly decided that, if any effort of hers could compass it, those surroundings should continue to be No. 24 Brutton Square.

Diana herself looked tired but irrepressibly happy. Now that it was all over, and success assured, she realised how intensely she had dreaded the ordeal of this first recital.

Olga Lermontof, her injured hand resting in a sling, chaffed her with some amusement.

"I suppose, at last, you're beginning to understand that your voice is really something out of the ordinary," she said. "Its effect on the audience this afternoon is a better criterion than all the notices in to-morrow's newspapers put together."

Diana laughed.

"Well, I hope it won't make a habit of producing that effect!" she said, pulling a little face of disgust at the recollection. "I don't know what would have happened if Mr. Errington hadn't come to my rescue."

Max smiled across at her.

"You'd have been torn to bits and the pieces distributed amongst the audience—like souvenir programmes—I imagine," he replied. Then, turning towards the accompanist, he continued: "How does your hand feel now, Miss Lermontof?"

There was a curious change in his voice as he addressed the Russian, and Diana, glancing quickly towards her, surprised a strangely wistful look in her eyes as they rested upon Errington's face.

"Oh, it is much better. I shall be able to play again in

a few days. But it was fortunate you were at the concert to-day, and able to take my place."

"So you approve of me—for once?" he queried, with a rather twisted little smile.

Olga remained silent for a moment, her eyes searching his face. Then she said very deliberately:—

"I am glad you were able to play for Miss Quentin."

"But you won't commit yourself so far as to say that I have your approval—even once?"

Miss Lermontof leaned forward impetuously.

"How can I?" she said, in hurried tones. "It's all wrong—oh! you know that it's all wrong."

Errington shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm afraid we can never see eye to eye," he answered. "Let us, then, be philosophical over the matter and agree to differ."

Olga's green eyes flamed with sudden anger, but she abstained from making any reply, turning away from him abruptly.

Diana, whose attention had been claimed by the Rector, had not caught the quickly spoken sentences which had passed between the two, but she was puzzled over the oddly yearning look she had surprised in Olga's eyes. There had been a tenderness, a species of wistful longing in her gaze, as she had turned towards Max Errington, which tallied ill with the bitter incisiveness of the remarks she let fall at times concerning him.

"Well, my dear"—the Rector's voice recalled Diana's wandering thoughts—"Joan and I must be getting back to our hotel, if we are to be dressed in time for the dinner Miss de Gervais is giving in your honour to-night."

Diana glanced at the clock and nodded.

"Indeed you must, Pobs darling. And I will send away these other good people too. As we're all going to meet again at dinner we can bear to be separated for an hour or

so—even Jerry and Joan, I suppose?" she added whimsically, in a lower tone.

"It's invidious to mention names," murmured Stair, "or I might——"

Diana laid her hand lightly across his mouth.

"No, you mightn't," she said firmly. "Put on your coat and that nice squashy hat of yours, and trot back to your hotel like a good Pobs."

Stair laughed, looking down at her with kind eyes.

"Very well, little autocrat." He put his hand under her chin and tilted her face up. "I've not congratulated you yet, my dear. It's a big thing you've done—captured London in a day. But it's a bigger thing you'll have to do."

"You mean Paris—Vienna?"

He shook his head, still with the kind smile in his eyes. "No. I mean, keep me the little Diana I love—don't let me lose her in the public singer."

"Oh, Pobs!"—reproachfully. "As though I should ever change!"

"Not deliberately—not willingly, I'm sure. But—success is a difficult sea to swim."

He sighed, kissed her upturned face, and then, with a twist of his shoulders, pulled on his overcoat and prepared to depart.

Success is exhilarating. It goes to the head like wine, and yet, as Diana lay in bed that night, staring with wide eyes into the darkness, the memory that stood out in vivid relief from amongst the crowded events of the day was not the triumph of the afternoon, nor the merry evening which succeeded it, when "the coming *prima donna*" had been toasted amid a fusillade of brilliant little speeches and light-hearted laughter, but the remembrance of a pair of passionate, demanding blue eyes and of a low, tense voice saying:—

"I swear I won't fail you. Let me 'stand by.'"

CHAPTER XIV

THE FLAME OF LOVE

DIANA'S gaze wandered idly over the blue stretch of water, as it lay beneath the blazing August sun, while the sea-gulls, like streaks of white light, wheeled through the shimmering haze of the atmosphere. Her hands were loosely clasped around her knees, and a little evanescent smile played about her lips. Behind her, the great red cliffs of Culver Point reared up against the sapphire of the sky, and she was thinking dreamily of that day, nearly eighteen months ago, when she had been sitting in the self-same place, leaning against the self-same rock, whilst a grey waste of water crept hungrily up to her very feet, threatening to claim her as its prey. And then Errington had come, and straightway all the danger was passed.

Looking back, it seemed as though that had always been the way of things. Some menace had arisen, either by land or sea—or even, as at her recital, out of the very intensity of feeling which her singing had inspired—and immediately Max had intervened and the danger had been averted.

She laid her hand caressingly on the sun-warmed surface of the rock. How many things had happened since she had last leaned against its uncomfortable excrescences! She felt quite affectionately towards it, as one who has journeyed far may feel towards some old landmark of his youth which he finds unaltered on his return from wandering in strange lands. The immutability of *things,* as compared with the constant fluctuation of life and circumstance, struck her poignantly. Here was this rock—cast up from the bowels

of the earth thousands of years ago and washed by the waves of a million tides—still unchanged and changeless, while, for her, the face of the whole world had altered in little more than a year!

From a young girl-student, one insignificant person among scores of others similarly insignificant, she had become a prominent personality, some one in whom even the great, busy, hurrying world paused to take an interest, and of whom the newspapers wrote eulogistic notices, heralding her as the coming English *prima donna*. She felt rather like a mole which has been working quietly in the dark, tunnelling a passage for itself, unseen and unsuspected, and which has suddenly emerged above the surface of the earth, much to its own—and every one else's—astonishment!

Then, too, how utterly changed were her relations with Max Errington! At the beginning of their acquaintance he had held himself deliberately aloof, but since that evening at Adrienne de Gervais' house, when they had formed a compact of friendship, he had, apparently, completely blotted out from his mind the remembrance of the obstacle, whatever it might be, which he had contended must render any friendship between them out of the question.

And during these last few months Diana had gradually come to know the lofty strain of idealism which ran through the man's whole nature. Passionate, obstinate, unyielding—he could be each and all in turn, but, side by side with these exterior characteristics, there ran a streak of almost feminine delicacy of perception and ideality of purpose. Diana had once told him, laughingly, that he was of the stuff of which martyrs were made in the old days of persecution, and in this she had haphazard lit upon the fundamental force that shaped his actions. The burden which fate, or his own deeds, might lay upon his shoulders, that he would bear, be it what it might.

"Everything's got to be paid for," he had said one day. "It's inevitable. So what's the use of jibing at the price?"

Diana wondered whether the price of that mysterious something which lay in his past, and which not even intimate friendship had revealed to her, would mean that this comradeship must always remain only that—and never anything more?

A warm flush mounted to her face as the unbidden thought crept into her mind. Errington had been down at Crailing most of the summer, staying at Red Gables, and during the long, lazy days they had spent together, motoring, or sailing, or tramping over Dartmoor with the keen moorland air, like sparkling wine, in their nostrils, it seemed as though a deeper note had sounded than merely that of friendship.

And yet he had said nothing, although his eyes had spoken —those vivid blue eyes which sometimes blazed with a white heat of smouldering passion that set her heart racing madly within her.

She flinched shyly away from her own thoughts, pulling restlessly at the dried weed which clung about the surface of the rock. A little brown crab ran out from a crevice, and, terrified by the big human hand which he espied meddling with the clump of weed and threatening to interfere with the liberty of the subject, skedaddled sideways into the safety of another cranny.

The hurried rush of the little live thing roused Diana from her day-dreams, and looking up, she saw Max coming to her across the sands.

She watched the proud, free gait of the tall figure with appreciation in her eyes. There was something very individual and characteristic about Max's walk—a suggestion as of immense vitality held in check, together with a certain air of haughty resolution and command.

"I thought I might find you here," he said, when they had shaken hands.

"Did you want me?"

He looked at her with a curious expression in his eyes.

"I always want you, I think," he said simply.

"Well, you seem to have a faculty for always turning

up when *I* want *you*," she replied. "I was just thinking how often you had appeared in the very nick of time. Seriously"—her voice took on a graver note—"I feel I can't ever repay you—you've come to my help so often."

"There is a way," he said, very low, and then fell silent.

"Tell me," she urged him, smilingly. "I like to pay my debts."

He made no answer, and Diana, suddenly nervous and puzzled, continued a little breathlessly:—

"Have I—have I offended you? I—I thought"—her lips quivered—"we had agreed to be friends."

Max was silent a moment. Then he said slowly:—

"I can't keep that compact."

Diana's heart contracted with a sudden fear.

"Can't keep it?" she repeated dully. She could not picture her life—no—robbed of this friendship!

"No." His hands hung clenched at his sides, and he stood staring at her from beneath bent brows, his mouth set in a straight line. It was as though he were holding himself under a rigid restraint, against which something within him battled, striving for release.

All at once his control snapped.

"I love you! . . . God in heaven! Haven't you guessed it?"

The words broke from him like a bitter cry—the cry of a heart torn in twain by love and thwarted longing. Diana felt the urgency of its demand thrill through her whole being.

"Max . . ."

It was the merest whisper, reaching his ears like the touch of a butterfly's wing—hesitantly shy, and honey-sweet with the promise of summer.

The next instant his arms were round her and he was holding her as though he would never let her go, passionately kissing the soft mouth, so close beneath his own. He lifted her off her feet, crushing her to him, and Diana, the woman in her definitely, vividly aroused at last, clung to

him, yielding, but half-terrified by the tempest of emotion she had waked.

"My beloved! . . . *My soul!*"

His voice was vehement with the love and passion at length unleashed from bondage; his kisses hurt her. There was something torrential, overwhelming, in his imperious wooing. He held her with the fierce, possessive grip of primitive man claiming the chosen woman as his mate.

She struggled faintly against him.

"Ah! Max—Max. . . . Let me go. You're frightening me."

She heard him draw his breath hard, and then slowly, reluctantly, as though by a sheer effort of will, he set her down. He was white to the lips, and his eyes glowed like blue flame in their pallid setting.

"Frighten you!" he repeated hoarsely. "You don't know what love means—you English."

Diana stared at him.

"'You English!' What—what are you saying? Max, aren't you English after all?"

He threw back his head with a laugh.

"Oh, yes, I'm English. But I'm something else as well. . . . There's warmer blood in my veins, and I can't love like an Englishman. Oh, Diana, heart's beloved, let me teach you what love is!"

Impetuously he caught her in his arms again, and once more she felt the storm of his passion sweep over her as he rained fierce kisses on eyes and throat and lips. For a space it seemed as if the whole world were blotted out and there were only they two alone together—shaken to the very foundations of their being by the tremendous force of the whirlwind of love which had engulfed them.

When at length he released her, all her reserves were down.

"Max . . . Max . . . I love you!"

The confession fell from her lips with a timid, exquisite

abandon. He was her mate and she recognised it. He had conquered her.

Presently he put her from him, very gently, but decisively.

"Diana, heart's dearest, there is something more—something I have not told you yet."

She looked at him with sudden apprehension in her eyes.

"Max! . . . Nothing—nothing that need come between us?"

Memories of the past, of all the incomprehensible episodes of their acquaintance—his refusal to recognise her, his reluctance to accept her friendship—came crowding in upon her, threatening the destruction of her new-found happiness.

"Not if you can be strong—not if you'll trust me." He looked at her searchingly.

"Trust you? But I do trust you. Should I have . . . Oh, Max!" the warm colour dyed her face from chin to brow—"Could I love you if I didn't trust you?"

There was a tender, almost compassionate expression in his eyes as he answered, rather sadly:—

"Ah, my dear, we don't know what 'trust' really means until we are called upon to give it. . . . And I want so much from you!"

Diana slipped her hand confidently into his.

"Tell me," she said, smiling at him. "I don't think I shall fail you."

He was silent for a while, wondering if the next words he spoke would set them as far apart as though the previous hour had never been. At last he spoke.

"Do you believe that husbands and wives should have no secrets from one another?" he asked abruptly.

Diana had never really given the matter consideration —never formulated such a question in her mind. But now, in the light of love's awakening, she instinctively knew the

answer to it. Her opinion leaped into life fully formed; she was aware, without the shadow of a doubt, of her own feelings on the subject.

"Certainly they shouldn't," she answered promptly. "Why, Max, that would be breaking the very link that binds them together—their *oneness* each with the other. You think that, too, don't you? Why—why did you ask me?" A premonition of evil assailed her, and her voice trembled a little.

"I asked you because—because if you marry me you will have to face the fact that there is a secret in my life which I cannot share with you—something I can't tell you about." Then, as he saw the blank look on her face, he went on rapidly: "It will be the only thing, beloved. There shall be nothing else in life that will not be 'ours,' between us, shared by us both. I swear it! . . . Diana, I must make you understand. It was because of this—this secret—that I kept away from you. You couldn't understand—oh! I saw it in your face sometimes. You were hurt by what I did and said, and it tortured me to hurt you—to see your lip quiver, your eyes suddenly grow misty, and to know it was I who had wounded you, I, who would give the last drop of blood in my body to save you pain."

There was a curious stricken expression on the face Diana turned towards him.

"So that was it!"

"Yes, that was it. I tried to put you out of my life, for I'd no right to ask you into it. And I've failed! I can't do without you"—his voice gathered intensity—"I want you—body and soul I want you. And yet—a secret between husband and wife is a burden no man should ask a woman to bear."

When next Diana spoke it was in a curiously cold, collected voice. She felt stunned. A great wall seemed to be rising up betwixt herself and Max; all her golden visions for the future were falling about her in ruins.

"You are right," she said slowly. "No man should ask —that—of his wife."

Errington's face twisted with pain.

"I never meant to let you know I cared," he answered. "I fought down my love for you just because of that. And then—it grew too strong for me. . . . My God! If you knew what it's been like—to be near you, with you, constantly, and yet to feel that you were as far removed from me as the sun itself. Diana—beloved—can't you trust me over this one thing? Isn't your love strong enough for that?"

She turned on him passionately.

"Oh, you are unfair to me—cruelly unfair! You ask me to trust you! And your very asking implies that *you* cannot trust *me!*"

There was bitter anger in her voice.

"I know it looks like that," he said wearily. "And I can't explain. I can only ask you to believe in me and trust me. I thought . . . perhaps . . . you loved me enough to do it." His mouth twitched with a little smile, half sad, half ironical. "My usual presumption, I suppose."

She made no answer, but after a moment asked abruptly:—

"Does this—this secret concern only you?"

"That I cannot tell you. I can't answer any questions. If—if you come to me, it must be in absolute blind trust." He paused, his eyes entreating her. "Is it . . . too much to ask?"

Diana was silent, looking away from him across the water. The sun slipped behind a cloud, and a grey shadow spread like a blight over the summer sea. It lay leaden and dull, tufted with little white crests of foam.

The man and woman stood side by side, motionless, unresponsive. It was as though a sword had suddenly descended, cleaving them asunder.

Presently she heard him mutter in a low tone of anguish:—

"So this—this, too—must be added to the price!"

The pain in his voice pulled at her heart. She stretched out her hands towards him.

"Max! Give me time!"

He wheeled round, and the tense look of misery in his face hurt her almost physically.

"What do you mean?" he asked hoarsely.

"I must have time to think. Husband and wife ought to be one. What—what happiness can there be if . . . if we marry . . . like this?"

He bent his head.

"None—unless you can have faith. There can be no happiness for us without that."

He took a sudden step towards her.

"Oh, my dear, my dear! I love you so!"

Diana began to cry softly—helpless, pathetic, weeping, like a child's.

"And—and I thought we were so happy," she sobbed. "Now it's all spoiled and broken. And *you've* spoilt it!"

"Don't!" he said unsteadily. "Don't cry like that. I can't stand it."

He made an instinctive movement to take her in his arms, but she slipped aside, turning on him in sudden, passionate reproach.

"Why did you try and make me love you when you knew . . . all this? I was quite happy before you came—oh, so happy!"—with a sudden yearning recollection of the days of unawakened girlhood. "If—if you had let me alone, I should have been happy still."

The unthinking selfishness of youth rang in her voice, asserting its infinite demand for the joy and pleasure of life.

"And I?" he said, very low. "Does my unhappiness count for nothing? I'm paying too. God knows, I wish we had never met."

Never to have met! Not to have known all that those months of friendship and a single hour of love had held! The words brought a sudden awakening to Diana—a new, wonderful knowledge that, cost what they might in bitterness and future pain, she would rather bear the cost than know her life emptied of those memories.

She had ceased crying. After a few moments she spoke with a gentle, wistful composure.

"I was wrong, Max. You're not to blame—you couldn't help it any more than I could."

"I might have gone away—kept away from you," he said tonelessly.

A faint, wintry little smile curved her lips.

"I'm glad you didn't."

"Diana!" He sprang forward impetuously. "Do you mean that?"

She nodded slowly.

"Yes. Even if—if we can't ever marry, we've had . . . to-day."

A smouldering fire lit itself in the man's blue eyes. He had spoken but the bare truth when he had said that warmer blood ran in his veins than that of the cold northern peoples.

"Yes," he said, his voice tense. "We've had to-day."

Diana trembled a little. The memory of that fierce, wild love-making of his rushed over her once more, and the primitive woman in her longed to yield to its mastery. But the cooler characteristics of her nature bade her pause and weigh the full significance of marrying a man whose life was tinged with mystery, and who frankly acknowledged that he bore a secret which must remain hidden, even from his wife.

It would be taking a leap in the dark, and Diana shrank from it.

"I must have time to think," she repeated. "I can't decide to-day."

"No," he said, "you're right. I've known that all the time, only—only"—his voice shook—"the touch of you, the nearness of you, blinded me." He paused. "Don't keep me waiting for your answer longer than you can help, Diana," he added, with a quiet intensity.

"You'll go away from Crailing?" she asked nervously.

He smiled a little sadly.

"Yes, I'll go away. I'll leave you quite free to make your decision," he replied.

She breathed a sigh of relief. She knew that if he were to remain at Crailing, if they were to continue seeing each other almost daily, there could be but one end to the matter—her conviction that no happiness could result from such a marriage would go by the board. It could not stand against the breathless impetuosity of Max's love-making—not when her own heart was eager and aching to respond.

"Thank you, Max," she said simply, extending her hand.

He put it aside, drawing her into his embrace.

"Beloved," he said, and now there was no passion, no fierceness of desire in his voice, only unutterable tenderness. "Beloved, please God you will find it in your heart to be good to me. All my thoughts are yours, but for that one thing over which I need your faith. . . . I think no man ever loved a woman so utterly as I love you. And oh! little white English rose of my heart, I'd never ask more than you could give. Love isn't all passion. It's tenderness and shielding and service, dear, as well as fire and flame. A man loves his wife in all the little ways of daily life as well as in the big ways of eternity."

He stooped his head, and a shaft of sunlight flickered across his bright hair. Diana watched it with a curious sense of detachment. Very gently he laid her hands against his lips, and the next moment he was swinging away from her across the stretch of yellow sand, leaving her alone once more with the sea and the sky and the wheeling gulls.

CHAPTER XV

DIANA'S DECISION

MAX had been gone a week—a week of distress and miserable indecision for Diana, racked as she was between her love and her conviction that marriage under the only circumstances possible would inevitably bring unhappiness. Over and above this fear there was the instinctive recoil she felt from Errington's demand for such blind faith. Her pride rebelled against it. If he loved her and had confidence in her, why couldn't he trust her with his secret? It was treating her like a child, and it would be wrong—all wrong—she argued, to begin their married life with concealment and secrecy for its foundation.

One morning she even wrote to him, telling him definitely either that he must trust her altogether, or that they must part irrevocably. But the letter was torn up the same afternoon, and Diana went to bed that night with her decision still untaken.

For several nights she had slept but little, and once again she passed long hours tossing feverishly from side to side of the bed or pacing up and down her room, love and pride fighting a stubborn battle within her. Had Max remained at Crailing, love would have gained an easy victory, but, true to his promise, he had gone away, leaving her to make her decision free and untrammelled by his influence.

Diana's face was beginning to show signs of the mental struggle through which she was passing. Dark shadows lay beneath her eyes, and her cheeks, even in so short a time, had hollowed a little. She was irritable, too, and unlike

herself, and at last Stair, whose watchful eyes had noted all these things, though he had refrained from comment, taxed her with keeping him outside her confidence.

"Can't I help, Di?" he asked, laying his hand on her shoulder, and twisting her round so that she faced him.

The quick colour flew into her cheeks. For a moment she hesitated, while Stair, releasing his hold of her, dropped into a chair and busied himself filling and lighting his pipe.

"Well?" he queried at last, smiling whimsically. "Won't you give me an old friend's right to ask impertinent questions?"

Impulsively she yielded.

"You needn't, Pobs. I'll tell you all about it."

When she had finished, a long silence ensued. Not that Stair was in any doubt as to what form his advice should take—idealist that he was, there did not seem to him to be any question in the matter. He only hesitated as to how he could best word his counsel.

At last he spoke, very gently, his eyes lit with that inner radiance which gave such an arresting charm of expression to his face.

"My dear," he said, "it seems to me that if you love him you needs *must* trust him. 'Perfect love casteth out fear.'"

Diana shook her head.

"Mightn't you reverse that, Pobs, and say that *he* would trust *me*—if he loves me?"

"No, not necessarily." Alan sucked at his pipe. "He knows what his secret is, and whether it is right or wrong for you to share it. You haven't that knowledge. And that's where your trust must come in. You have to believe in him enough to leave it to him to decide whether you ought to be told or not. Have you no confidence in his judgment?"

"I don't think husbands and wives should have secrets from one another," protested Diana obstinately.

"Does he propose to have any other than this one?"

"No."

"Then I don't see that you need complain. The present and the future are yours, but you've no right to demand the past as well. And this secret, whatever it may be, belongs to the past."

"As far as I can see it will be cropping up in the future as well," said Diana ruefully. "It seems to be a 'continued in our next' kind of mystery."

Stair laughed boyishly.

"It should add a zest to life if that's the case," he retorted.

Diana was silent a moment. Then she said suddenly:—

"Pobs, what am I to do?"

Instantly Stair became grave again.

"My dear, do you love him?"

Diana nodded, her eyes replying.

"Then nothing else matters a straw. If you love him enough to trust him with the whole of the rest of your life, you can surely trust him over a twopenny-halfpenny little secret which, after all, has nothing in the world to do with you. If you can't, do you know what it looks like?"

She regarded him questioningly.

"It looks as though you suspected the secret of being a disgraceful one—something of which Max is ashamed to tell you. Do you"—sharply—"think that?"

"Of course I don't!" she burst out indignantly.

"Then why trouble? Possibly the matter concerns some one else besides himself, and he may not be at liberty to tell you anything—he might have a dozen different reasons for keeping his own counsel. And the woman who loves him and is ready to be his wife is the first to doubt and distrust him! Diana, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. If my wife"—his voice shook a little—"had ever doubted me—no matter how black things might have looked against me—I think it would have broken my heart."

Diana's head drooped lower and lower as he spoke, and presently her hand stole out, seeking his. In a moment it was taken and held in a close and kindly clasp.

"I'll—I'll marry him, Pobs," she whispered.

So it came about that when, two days later, Max took his way to 24 Brutton Square, the gods had better gifts in store for him than he had dared to hope.

He was pacing restlessly up and down her little sitting-room when she entered it, and she could see that his face bore traces of the last few days' anxiety. There were new lines about his mouth, and his eyes were so darkly shadowed as to seem almost sunken in their sockets.

"You have come back!" he said, stepping eagerly towards her. "Diana"—there was a note of strain in his voice—"which is it? Yes—or no?"

She held out her hands.

"It's—it's 'yes,' Max."

A stifled exclamation broke from him, almost like a sob. He folded her in his arms and laid his lips to hers.

"My beloved! . . . Oh, Diana, if you could guess the agony—the torture of the last ten days!" And he leaned his cheek against her hair, and stood silently for a little space.

Presently fear overcame him again—quick fear lest she should ever regret having given herself to him.

"Heart's dearest, have you realised that it will be very hard sometimes? You will ask me to explain things—and I shan't be able to. Is your trust big enough—great enough for this?"

Diana raised her head from his shoulder.

"I love you," she answered steadily.

"Do you forget the shadow? It is there still, dogging my steps. Not even your love can alter that."

For a moment Diana rose to the heights of her womanhood.

"If there must be a shadow," she said, "we will walk in it together."

"But—don't you see?—I shall know what it is. To you it will always be something unknown, hidden, mysterious. Child! Child! I wonder if I am right to let you join your life to mine!"

But Diana only repeated:—

"I love you."

And at last he flung all thoughts of warning and doubt aside, and secure in that reiterated "I love you!" yielded to the unutterable joy of the moment.

CHAPTER XVI

BARONI'S OPINION OF MATRIMONY

PER Dio! What is this you tell me? That you are to be married? . . . My dear Mees Quentin, please put all such thoughts of foolishness out of your mind. You are consecrated to art. The young man must find another bride."

It was thus that Carlo Baroni received the news of Diana's engagement—at first with unmitigated horror, then sweeping it aside as though it were a matter of no consequence whatever.

Diana laughed, dimpling with amusement at the *maestro's* indignation. Now that she had given her faith, refusing to allow anything to stand between her and Max, she was so supremely happy that she felt she could afford to laugh at such relatively small obstacles as would be raised by her old singing-master.

"I'm afraid the 'young man' wouldn't agree to that," she returned gaily. "He would say you must find another pupil."

Baroni surveyed her with anxiety.

"You are not serious?" he queried at last.

"Indeed I am. I'm actually engaged—now, at this moment—and we propose to get married before Christmas."

"But it is impossible! *Giusto Cielo!* But impossible!" reiterated the old man. "Mees Quentin, you cannot haf understood. Perhaps, in my anxiety that you should strain every nerve to improve, I haf not praised you enough—and so you haf not understood. Leesten, then. You haf a voice than which there is not one so good in the whole

of Europe. It is superb—marvellous—the voice of the century. With that voice you will haf the whole world at your feet; before long you will command almost fabulous fees, and more, far more than this, you can interpret the music of the great masters as they themselves would wish to hear it. Me, Baroni, I know it. And you would fling such possibilities, such a career, aside for mere matrimony! It is nonsense, I tell you, sheer nonsense!"

He paused for breath, and Diana laid her hand deprecatingly on his arm.

"Dear *Maestro,*" she said, "it's good of you to tell me all this, and—and you mustn't think for one moment that I ever forget all you've done for me. It's you who've made my voice what it is. But there isn't the least reason why I should give up singing because I'm going to be married. I don't intend to, I assure you."

"I haf no doubt you mean well. But I haf heard other young singers say the same thing, and then the husband —the so English husband!—he objects to his wife's appearing in public, and *presto!* . . . Away goes the career! No singer should marry until she is well established in her profession. You are young. Marry in ten years' time and you shall haf my blessing."

"I shall want your blessing sooner than that," laughed Diana. "But I'm not marrying a 'so English husband'! He's only partly English, and he's quite willing for me to go on singing."

Baroni regarded her seriously.

"Is that so? Good! Then I will talk to the young man, so that he may realise that he is not marrying just Mees Diana Quentin, but a voice—a heaven-bestowed voice. What is his name?"

"You know him," she answered smilingly. "It's Max Errington."

She was utterly unprepared for the effect of her words. Baroni's face darkened like a stormy sky, and his eyes lit-

erally blazed at her from beneath their penthouse of shaggy brow.

"Max Errington! *Donnerwetter!* But that is the worst of all!"

Diana stared at him in mute amazement, and, despite herself, her heart sank with a sudden desperate apprehension. What did it mean? Why should the mere mention of Max's name have roused the old *maestro* to such a fever of indignation?

Presently Baroni turned to her again, speaking more composedly, although little sparks of anger still flickered in his eyes ready to leap into flame at the slightest provocation.

"I haf met Mr. Errington. He is a charming man. But if you marry him, my dear Mees Quentin—good-bye to your career as a world-artiste, good-bye to the most marvellous voice that the good God has ever let me hear."

"I don't see why. Max thoroughly understands professional life."

"Nevertheless, believe me, there will—there *must* come a time when Max Errington's wife will not be able to appear before the world as a public singer. I who speak, I know."

Diana flashed round upon him suddenly.

"*You*—you know his secret?"

"I know it."

So, then, the secret which must be hidden from his wife was yet known to Carlo Baroni! Diana felt her former resentment surge up anew within her. It was unfair—shamefully unfair for Max to treat her in this way! It was making a mockery of their love.

Baroni's keen old eyes read the conflict of emotions in her face, and he laid his finger unerringly upon the sore spot. His one idea was to prevent Diana from marrying, to guard her—as he mentally phrased it—for the art he loved so well, and he was prepared to stick at nothing that might aid his cause.

"So he has not told you?" he said slowly. "Do you not think it strange of him?"

Diana's breast rose and fell tumultuously. Baroni was turning the knife in the wound with a vengeance.

"*Maestro,* tell me,"—her voice came unevenly—"tell me. Is it"—she turned her head away—"is it a . . . shameful . . . secret?"

Inwardly she loathed herself for asking such a thing, but the words seemed dragged from her without her own volition.

Baroni hesitated. All his hopes and ambitions centred round Diana and her marvellous voice. He had given of his best to train it to its present perfection, and now he saw the fruit of his labour about to be snatched from him. It was more than human nature could endure. Errington meant nothing to him, Diana and her voice everything; and he was prepared to sacrifice no matter whom to secure her career as an artiste. By implication he sacrificed Errington.

"It is not possible for me to say more. But be advised, my dear pupil. Out of my great love for you I say it—*let Max Errington go his way.*"

And with those words—sinister, warning—ringing in her ears, Diana returned to Brutton Square.

But Baroni was not content to let matters remain as they stood, trusting that his warning would do its work. He was determined to leave no stone unturned, and he forthwith sought out Errington in his own house and deliberately broached the subject of his engagement to Diana.

Max greeted him affectionately.

"It's a long while since you honoured me with a visit," he said, shaking hands. "I suppose"—laughingly—"you've come to congratulate me?"

The old man shook his head.

"Far from it. I haf come to ask you to give her up."

"To give her up?" repeated Max, in undisguised amazement.

"Yes. Mees Quentin is not for marriage. She is dedicated to Art."

Max smiled indulgently.

"To Art? Yes. But she's for me, too, thank God! Dear old friend, you need not look so anxious and concerned. I've no wish to interfere with Diana's professional work. You shall have her voice"—smiling—"I'll be content to hold her heart."

But there was no answering smile on Baroni's lips.

"*Does she know—everything?*" he asked sternly.

Max shook his head.

"No. How could she? . . . *You* must realise the impossibility of that," he answered slowly.

"And you think it right to let her marry you in ignorance?"

Max hesitated. Then—

"She trusts me," he said at last.

"Pish! For how long? . . . When she sees daily under her eyes things that she cannot explain, unaccountable things, how long will she remain satisfied, I ask you? And then will begin unhappiness."

Errington stiffened.

"And what has our—supposititious—unhappiness to do with you, Signor Baroni?" he asked haughtily.

"*Your* unhappiness? Nothing. It is the price you must pay—your inheritance. But hers? Everything. Tears, fretting, vexation—and that beautiful voice, that perfect organ, may be impaired. Think! Think what you are doing! Just for your own personal happiness you are risking the voice of the century, the voice that will give pleasure to tens of thousands—to millions. You are committing a crime against Art."

Max smiled in spite of himself.

"Truly, *Maestro,* I had not thought of it like that," he admitted. "But I think her faith in me will carry us through," he added confidently.

"Never! Never! Women are not made like that."

"And perhaps, later on, if things go well, I shall be able to tell her all."

"And much good that will do! *Diavolo!* When the time comes that things go well—if it ever does come——"

"It will. It shall," said Max firmly.

"Well, if it does—I ask you, can she then continue her life as an artiste?"

Max reflected.

"Yes, if I remain in England—which I hope to do. I counted on that when I asked her to marry me. I think I shall be able to arrange it."

"If! If! Are you going to hang your wife's happiness upon an 'if'?" Baroni spoke with intense anger. "And 'if' you *cannot* remain in England, if you haf to go back—*there?* Can your wife still appear as a public singer?"

"No," acknowledged Max slowly. "I suppose not."

"No! Her career will be ruined. And all this is the price she will haf to pay for her—*trust!* Give it up, give it up—set her free."

Max flung himself into a chair, leaning his arms wearily on the table, and stared straight in front of him, his eyes dark with pain.

"I can't," he said, in a low voice. "Not now. I meant to—I tried to—but now she has promised and I can't let her go. Good God, *Maestro!*"—a sudden ring of passion in his tones—"Must I give up everything? Am I to have nothing in the world? Always to be a tool and never live an individual man's life of my own?"

Baroni's face softened a little.

"One cannot escape one's destiny," he said sadly. *"Che sarà sarà.* . . . But you can spare—her. Tell her the truth, and in common fairness let her judge for herself—not rush blindfold into such a web."

Max shook his head.

"You know I can't do that," he replied quietly.

Baroni threw out his arms in despair.

"I would tell her the whole truth myself—but for the memory of one who is dead." Sudden tears dimmed the

fierce old eyes. "For the sake of that sainted martyr—martyr in life as well as in death—I will hold my peace."

A half-sad, half-humorous smile flashed across Errington's face.

"We're all of us martyrs—more or less," he observed drily.

"And you wish to add Mees Quentin to the list?" retorted Baroni. "Well, I warn you, I shall fight against it. I will do everything in my power to stop this marriage."

Max shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm sure you will," he said, smiling faintly. "But—forgive me, *Maestro*—I don't think you will succeed."

As soon as Baroni had taken his departure, Max called a taxi, and hurried off to see Adrienne de Gervais. He had arranged to talk over with her a certain scene in the play he was now writing for her, and which was to be produced early in the New Year.

Adrienne welcomed him good-humouredly.

"A little late," she observed, glancing at the clock. "But I suppose one must not expect punctuality when a man's in love."

"I know I'm late, but I can assure you"—with a grim smile—"love had little enough to do with it."

Adrienne looked up sharply, struck by the bitter note in his voice.

"Then what had?" she asked. "What has gone wrong, Max? You look fagged out."

"Baroni has been round to see me—to ask me to break off my engagement." He laughed shortly.

"He doesn't approve, I suppose?"

"That's a mild way of expressing his attitude."

Adrienne was silent a moment. Then she spoke, slowly, consideringly.

"I don't—approve—either. It isn't right, Max."

He bit his lip.

"So you—you, too, are against me?"

She stretched out her hand impulsively.

"Not against you, Max! Never that! How could I be? . . . But I don't think you're being quite fair to Diana. You ought to tell her the truth."

He wheeled round.

"No one knows better than you how impossible that is."

"Don't you trust her then—the woman you're asking to be your wife?"

The tinge of irony in her voice brought a sudden light of anger to his eyes.

"That's not very just of you, Adrienne," he said coldly. "*I* would trust her with my life. But I have no right to pledge the trust of others—and that's what I should be doing if I told her. We have our duty—you and I—and all this . . . is part of it."

Adrienne hesitated.

"Couldn't you—ask the others to release you?"

He shook his head.

"What right have I to ask them to trust an Englishwoman with their secret—just for my pleasure?"

"For your happiness," corrected Adrienne softly.

"Or for my happiness? My happiness doesn't count with them one straw."

"It does with me. I don't see why she shouldn't be told. Baroni knows, and Olga—you have to trust them."

"Baroni will be silent for the sake of the dead, and Olga out of her love—or fear"—with a bitter smile—"of me."

"And wouldn't Diana, too, be silent for your sake?"

"My dear Adrienne"—a little irritably—"Englishwomen are so frank—so indiscreetly trusting. That's where the difficulty lies, and I dare not risk it. There's too much at stake. But can you imagine any agent they may have put upon our track surprising her knowledge out of Olga?" He laughed contemptuously. "I fancy not! If Olga hadn't been a woman she'd have made her mark in the Diplomatic Service."

"Yet what is there to make her keep faith with us?" said Adrienne doubtfully. "She is poor——"

"Her own doing, that!"

"True, but the fact remains. And those others would pay a fortune for the information she could give. Besides, I believe she frankly hates me."

"Possibly. But she would never, I think, allow her personal feelings to override everything else. After all, she was one of us—is still, really, though she would gladly disown the connection."

"Well, when you've looked at every side of the matter, we only come back to the same point. I think you're acting wrongly. You're letting Diana pledge herself blindly, when you're not free to give her the confidence a man should give his wife—when you don't even know—yet—how it may all end."

Almost Baroni's very words! Max winced.

"No. I don't know how it will end, as you say. But surely there *will* come a time when I shall be free to live my own life?"

Adrienne smiled a trifle wistfully.

"If your conscience ever lets you," she said.

There was a long silence. Presently she resumed:—

"I never thought, when you first told me about your engagement, that the position of affairs need make any difference. I was so pleased to think that you cared for each other! And now—where will it all end? How many lives are going to be darkened by the same shadow? Oh, it's terrible, Max, terrible!"

The tears filled her eyes.

"Don't!" said Max unsteadily. "Don't! I know it's bad enough. Perhaps you're right—I oughtn't to have spoken to Diana. I hoped things would right themselves eventually, but you and Baroni have put another complexion upon matters. It's all an inextricable tangle, whichever way one looks at it—come good luck or bad! . . . I suppose I was wrong—I ought to have waited. But now . . . now . . . Before God, Adrienne! I can't give her up—not now!"

CHAPTER XVII

"WHOM GOD HATH JOINED TOGETHER"

MAX and Diana were married shortly before the following Christmas. The wedding took place very quietly at Crailing, only a few intimate friends being asked to it. For, as Max pointed out, either their invitations must be limited to a dozen or so, or else Diana must resign herself to a fashionable wedding in town, with all the world and his wife as guests at the subsequent reception. No middle course is possible when a well-known dramatist elects to marry the latest sensation in the musical world!

So it was in the tiny grey church overlooking the sea that Max and Diana were made one, with the distant murmur of the waves in their ears, and with Alan Stair to speak the solemn words that joined their lives together, and when the little intimate luncheon which followed the ceremony was over, they drove away in Max's car to the wild, beautiful coast of Cornwall, there to spend the first perfect days of their married life.

And they were perfect days! Afterwards, when clouds had dimmed the radiance of the sun, and doubts and ugly questionings were beating up on every side, Diana had always that radiant fortnight by the Cornish sea—she and Max alone together—to look back upon.

The woman whose married life holds sorrow, and who has no such golden memory stored away, is bereft indeed!

On their return to London, the Erringtons established themselves at Lilac Lodge, a charming old-fashioned house in Hampstead, where the creeper-clad walls and great bushes of lilac reminded Diana pleasantly of the old Rectory at

Crailing. Jerry made one of the household—"resident secretary" as he proudly termed himself, and his cheery, good-humoured presence was invaluable whenever difficulties arose.

But at first there were few, indeed, of the latter to contend with. Owing to the illness of an important member of the cast, without whose services Adrienne declined to perform, the production of Max's new play, "Mrs. Fleming's Husband," was delayed until the autumn. This postponement left him free to devote much more of his time to his wife than would otherwise have been possible, and for the first few months after their marriage it seemed as though no shadow could ever fall athwart their happiness.

In this respect Baroni's prognostications of evil had failed to materialise, but his fears that marriage would interfere with Diana's musical career were better founded. Quite easily and naturally she slipped out of the professional life which had just been opening its doors to her. She felt no inclination to continue singing in public. Max filled her existence, and although she still persevered with her musical training under Baroni, she told him with a frank enjoyment of the situation that she was far too happy and enjoying herself far too much to have any desire at present to take up the arduous work of a public singer!

Baroni was immeasurably disappointed, and not all Diana's assurances that in a year, or two at most, she would go back into harness once more sufficed to cheer him.

"A year—two years!" he exclaimed. "Two years lost at the critical time—just at the commencement of your career! Ah, my dear Mrs. Errington, you had better haf lost four years later on when you haf established yourself."

To Max himself the old *maestro* was short and to the point when chance gave him the opportunity of a few moments alone with him.

"You haf stolen her from me, Max Errington—you haf broken your promise that she should be free to sing."

Max responded good-humouredly:—

"She *is* free, *Maestro,* free to do exactly as she chooses. And she has chosen—to be my wife, to live for a time the pleasant, peaceful life that ordinary, everyday folk may live, who are not rushed hither and thither at the call of a career. Can you honestly say she hasn't chosen the better part?"

Baroni was silent.

"Don't grudge her a year or two of freedom," pursued Max. You know, you old slave-driver, you,"—laughing —"that it is only because you want her for your beloved Art—because you want her voice! Otherwise you would rejoice in her happiness."

"And you—what is it you want?" retorted Baroni, unappeased. "You want her soul! Whereas I would give her soul wings that she might send it singing forth into an enraptured world."

But Baroni's words fell upon stony ground, and Max and Diana went their way, absorbed in one another and in the wonderful happiness which love had brought them.

Thus spring slipped away into summer, and the season was in full swing when fate tossed the first pebble into their unruffled pool of joy.

It was only a brief paragraph, sandwiched in between the musical notes of a morning paper, to which Olga Lermontof, who came daily to Lilac Lodge to practise with Diana, drew the latter's attention. The paragraph recalled the fact that it was just a year since Miss Quentin had made her début, and then went on to comment lightly upon the brief and meteoric character of her professional appearances.

"Domesticity should not have claimed Miss Quentin"—so ran the actual words. "Hers was a voice the like of which we may not hear again, and the public grudges its

withdrawal. *Apropos,* we had always thought (until circumstances proved us hopelessly wrong) that the fortunate man, whose gain has been such a loss to the musical world, seemed born to write plays for a certain charming actress —and she to play the part which he assigned her."

Diana showed the paragraph to Max, who frowned as he read it, and finally tore the newspaper in which it had appeared across and across, flinging the pieces into the grate.

Then he turned and laid his hands on Diana's shoulders, gazing searchingly into her face.

"Have you felt—anything of what that paragraph suggests?" he demanded. "Am I taking too much from you, Diana? I love to keep you to myself—not to have to share you with the world, but I won't stand in your light, or hold you back if you wish to go—not even"—with a wry smile—"if it should mean your absence on a tour."

"Silly boy!" Diana patted his head reprovingly. "I don't *want* to sing in public—at least, not now, not yet. Later on, I dare say, I shall like to take it up again. And as for leaving you and going on tour"—laughingly—"the latter half of the paragraph should serve as a warning to me not to think of such a thing!"

To her surprise Max did not laugh with her. Instead, he answered coldly:—

"I hope you have more sense than to pay attention to what any damned newspaper may have to say about me—or about Miss de Gervais either."

"Why, Max,—Max——"

Diana stared at him in dismay, flushing a little. It was the first time he had spoken harshly to her since their marriage.

In an instant he had caught her in his arms, passionately repentant.

"Dearest, forgive me! It was only—only that you are

bound to read such things, and it angered me for a moment. Miss de Gervais and I see too much of each other to escape all comment."

Diana withdrew herself slowly from his arms.

"And—and must you see so much of her now? Now that we are married?" she asked, rather wistfully.

"Why, of course. We have so many professional matters to discuss. You must be prepared for that, Diana. When we begin rehearsing 'Mrs. Fleming's Husband,' I shall be down at the theatre every day."

"Oh, yes, at the theatre. But—but you go to see Adrienne rather often now, don't you? And the rehearsals haven't begun yet."

Max hesitated a moment. Then he said quietly:—

"Dear, you must learn not to be jealous of my work. There are always—many things—that I have to discuss with Miss de Gervais."

And so, for the time being, the subject dropped. But the shadow had flitted for a moment across the face of the sun. A little cloud, no bigger than a man's hand, had shown itself upon the horizon.

In July the Erringtons left town to spend a brief holiday at Crailing Rectory, and on their return the preparations for the production of "Mrs. Fleming's Husband" went forward in good earnest.

They had not been back in town a week before Diana realised that, as the wife of a dramatist on the eve of the production of a play, she must be prepared to cede her prior right in her husband to the innumerable people who claimed his time on matters relating to the forthcoming production, and, above all, to the actress who was playing the leading part in it.

And it was in respect of this latter demand that Diana found the matrimonial shoe begin to pinch. To her, it seemed as though Adrienne were for ever 'phoning Max to come and see her, and invariably he set everything else

aside—even Diana herself, if needs be—and obeyed her behest.

"I can't see why Adrienne wants to consult you so often," Diana protested one day. "She is perpetually ringing you up to go round to Somervell Street—or if it's not that, then she is writing to you."

Max laughed her protest aside.

"Well, there's a lot to consult about, you see," he said vaguely.

"So it seems. I shall be glad when it is all finished and I have you to myself again. When will the play be on?"

"About the middle of October," he replied, fidgeting restlessly with the papers that strewed his desk. They were talking in his own particular den, and Diana's eyes ruefully followed the restless gesture.

"I suppose," she said slowly, "you want me to go?"

"Well"—apologetically—"I have a lot to attend to this morning. Will you send Jerry to me—do you mind, dearest?"

"It wouldn't make much difference if I did," she responded grimly, as she went towards the door.

Max looked after her thoughtfully in silence. When she had gone, he leaned his head rather wearily upon his hand.

"It's better so," he muttered. "Better she should think it's only the play that binds me to Adrienne."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE APPROACHING SHADOW

DIANA gathered up her songs and slowly dropped them into her music-case, while Baroni stared at her with a puzzled, brooding look in his eyes.

At last he spoke:—

"You are throwing away the great gift God has given you. First, you will take no more engagements, and now —what is it? Where is your voice?"

Diana, conscious of having done herself less than justice at the lesson which was just concluded, shook her head.

"I don't know," she said simply. "I don't seem able to sing now, somehow."

Baroni shrugged his shoulders.

"You are fretting," he declared. "And so the voice suffers."

"Fretting? I don't know that I've anything to fret about"—vaguely. "Only I shall be glad when 'Mrs. Fleming's Husband' is actually produced. Just now"—with a rather wistful smile—"I don't seem to have a husband to call my own. Miss de Gervais claims so much of his time."

Baroni's brow grew stormy.

"Mees de Gervais? Of course! It is inevitable!" he muttered. "I knew it must be like that."

Diana regarded him curiously.

"But why? Do—do all dramatists have to consult so much with the leading actress in the play?"

The old *maestro* made a sweeping gesture with his arm, as though disavowing any knowledge of the matter.

"Do not ask me!" he said bitterly. "Ask Max Errington —ask your husband these questions."

At the condemnation in his voice her loyalty asserted itself indignantly.

"You are right," she said quickly. "I ought not to have asked you. Good-bye, signor."

But Diana's loyalty was hard put to it to fight the newly awakened jealousy that was stirring in her heart, and it seemed as though just now everything and everybody combined to add fuel to the fire, for, only a few days later, when Miss Lermontof came to Lilac Lodge to practise with Diana, she, too, added her quota of disturbing comment.

"You're looking very pale," she remarked, at the end of the hour. "And you're shockingly out of voice! What's the matter?"

Then, as Diana made no answer, she added teasingly: "Matrimony doesn't seem to have agreed with you too well. Doesn't Max play the devoted husband satisfactorily?"

Diana flushed.

"You've no right to talk like that, Olga, even in jest," she said, with a little touch of matronly dignity that sat rather quaintly and sweetly upon her. "I know you don't like Max—never have liked him—but please recollect that you're speaking of my husband."

"You misunderstand me," replied the Russian, coolly, as she drew on her gloves. "I *don't* dislike him; but I do think he ought to be perfectly frank with you. As you say, he is your husband"—pointedly.

"Perfectly frank with me?"

Miss Lermontof nodded.

"Yes."

"He has been," affirmed Diana.

"Has he, indeed? Have you ever asked him"—she paused significantly—"who he is?"

"Who he is?" Diana felt her heart contract. What new mystery was this at which the other was hinting?

"Who he is?" she repeated. "Why—why—what do you mean?"

The accompanist's queer green eyes narrowed between their heavy lids.

"Ask him—that's all," she replied shortly.

She drew her furs around her shoulders preparatory to departure, but Diana stepped in front of her, laying a detaining hand on her arm.

"What do you mean?" she demanded hotly. "Are you implying now that Max is going about under a false name? I hate your hints! Always, always you've tried to insinuate something against Max. . . . No!"—as the Russian endeavoured to free herself from her clasp—"No! You shan't leave this house till you've answered my question. You've made an accusation and you shall prove it—if I have to bring you face to face with Max himself!"

"I've made no accusation—merely a suggestion that you should ask him who he is. And as to bringing me face to face with him—I can assure you"—there was an inflection of ironical amusement in her light tones—"no one would be less anxious for such a *dénouement* than Max Errington himself. Now, good-bye; think over what I've said. And remember"—mockingly—"Adrienne de Gervais is a bad friend for the man one loves!"

She flitted through the doorway, and Diana was left to deal as best she might with the innuendo contained in her speech.

"Adrienne de Gervais is a bad friend for the man one loves."

The phrase seemed to crystallise in words the whole vague trouble that had been knocking at her heart, and she realised suddenly, with a shock of unbearable dismay, that she was *jealous—jealous of Adrienne!* Hitherto, she had not in the least understood the feeling of depression and *malaise* which had assailed her. She had only known that she felt restless and discontented when Max was out of her

ight, irritated at the amount of his time which Miss de ervais claimed, and she had ascribed these things to the epth of her love for him! But now, with a sudden flash f insight, engendered by the Russian's dexterous sug- estion, she realised that it was jealousy, sheer primitive ealousy of another woman that had gripped her, and her oung, wholesome, spontaneous nature recoiled in horrified elf-contempt at the realisation.

Pobs' good counsel came back to her mind: "It seems o me that if you love him, you needs *must* trust him." Ah! ut that was uttered in regard to another matter—the secret vhich shadowed Max's life—and she *had* trusted him over hat, she told herself. This, this jealousy of another woman, vas an altogether different thing, something which had rept insidiously into her heart, and woven its toils about er almost before she was aware of it.

And behind it all there loomed a new terror. Olga Ler- ontof's advice: *"Ask him who he is,"* beat at the back of er brain, fraught with fresh mystery, the forerunner of a vhole host of new suspicions.

Secrecy and concealment of any kind were utterly alien o Diana's nature. Impulsive, warm-hearted, quick-tem- ered, she was the last woman in the world to have been rust by an unkind fate into an atmosphere of intrigue nd mystery. She was like a pretty, fluttering, summer oth, caught in the gossamer web of a spider—terrified, ruggling, battling against something she did not under- and, and utterly without the patience and strong deter- ination requisite to free herself.

For hours after Olga's departure she fought down the mptation to follow her advice and question her husband. he could not bring herself to hurt him—as it must do if he uessed that she distrusted him. But neither could she nquer the suspicions that had leaped to life within her. t last, for the time being, love obtained the mastery—won e first round of the struggle.

"I *will* trust him," she told herself. "And—and whether I trust him or not," she ended up defiantly, "at least he shall never know, never see it, if—if I can't."

So that it was a very sweet and repentant, if rather wan Diana that greeted her husband when he returned from the afternoon rehearsal at the theatre.

Max's keen eyes swept the white, shadowed face.

"Has Miss Lermontof been here to-day?" he asked abruptly.

"Yes." A burning flush chased away her pallor as she answered his question.

"I see."

"You see?"—nervously. "What do you see?"

A very gentle expression came into Max's eyes.

"I see," he said kindly, "that I have a tired wife. You mustn't let Baroni and Miss Lermontof work you too hard between them."

"Oh, they don't, Max."

"All right, then. Only"—cupping her chin in his hand and turning her face up to his—"I notice I often have a somewhat worried-looking wife after one of Miss Lermontof's visits. I don't think she is too good a friend for you, Diana. Couldn't you get some one else to accompany you?"

Diana hesitated. She would have been quite glad to dispense with Olga's services had it been possible. The Russian was for ever hinting at something in connection either with Max or Miss de Gervais; to-day she had but gone a step further than usual.

"Well?" queried Max, reading the doubt in Diana's eyes.

"I'm afraid I couldn't engage any one else to accompany me," she said at last. "You see, Olga is Baroni's chosen accompanist, and—it might make trouble."

A curious expression crossed his face.

"Yes," he agreed slowly. "It might—make trouble, as you say. Well, why not ask Joan to stay with you for a time—to counterbalance matters?"

"Excellent suggestion!" exclaimed Diana, her spirits going up with a bound. Joan was always so satisfactory and cheerful and commonplace that she felt as though her mere presence in the house would serve to dispel the vague, indefinable atmosphere of suspicion that seemed closing round her. "I'll write to her at once."

"Yes, do. If she can come next month, she will be here for the first night of 'Mrs. Fleming's Husband.'"

Diana went away to write her letter, while Max remained pacing thoughtfully up and down the room, tapping restlessly with his fingers on his chest as he walked. His face showed signs of fatigue—the hard work in connection with the production of his play was telling on him—and since the brief interview with his wife, a new look of anxiety, an alert, startled expression, had dawned in his eyes.

He seemed to be turning something over in his mind as he paced to and fro. At last, apparently, he came to a decision.

"I'll do it," he said aloud. "It's a possible chance of silencing her."

He made his way downstairs, pausing at the door of the library, where Diana was poring over her letter to Joan.

"I find I must go out again," he said. "But I shall be back in time for dinner."

Diana looked up in dismay.

"But you've had no tea, Max," she protested.

"Can't stay for it now, dear."

He dropped a light kiss on her hair and was gone, while Diana, flinging down her pen, exclaimed aloud:—

"It's that woman again! I know it is! She's rung him up!"

And it never dawned upon her that the fact that she had unthinkingly referred to Adrienne de Gervais as "that woman" marked a turning-point in her attitude towards her.

Meanwhile Errington hailed a taxi and directed the chauf-

feur to drive him to 24 Brutton Square, where he asked to see Miss Lermontof.

He was shown into the big and rather gloomy-looking public drawing-room, of which none of Mrs. Lawrence's student-boarders made use except when receiving male visitors, much preferring the cheery comfort of their own bed-sitting-rooms—for Diana had been the only one amongst them whose means had permitted the luxury of a separate sitting-room—and in a few minutes Olga joined him there.

There was a curiously hostile look in her face as she greeted him.

"This is—an unexpected pleasure, Max," she began mockingly. "To what am I indebted?"

Errington hesitated a moment. Then, his keen eyes resting piercingly on hers, he said quietly:—

"I want to know how we stand, Olga. Are you trying to make mischief for me with my wife?"

"Then she's asked you?" exclaimed Olga triumphantly.

"Diana has asked me nothing. Though I have no doubt that you have been hinting and suggesting things to her that she *would* ask me about if it weren't for her splendid loyalty. You have the tongue of an asp, Olga! Always, after your visits, I can see that Diana is worried and unhappy."

"How can she ever be happy—as your wife?"

Errington winced.

"I could make her happy—if you—you and Baroni—would let me. I know I must regard you as an enemy in—that other matter . . . as a 'passive resister,' at least," he amended, with a bitter smile. "But am I to regard you as an enemy to my marriage, too? Or, is it your idea of punishment, perhaps—to wreck my happiness?"

Olga shrugged her shoulders, and, walking to the window, stood there silently, staring out into the street. When she turned back again, her eyes were full of tears.

"Max," she said earnestly, "you may not believe it, but

I want your happiness above everything else in the world. There is no one I love as I love you. Give up—that other affair. Wash your hands of it. Let Adrienne go, and take your happiness with Diana. That's what I'm working for—to make you choose between Diana and that interloper. You won't give her up for me; but perhaps, if Diana—if your wife—insists, you will shake yourself free, break with Adrienne de Gervais at last. Sometimes I'm almost tempted to tell Diana the truth, to force your hand!"

Errington's eyes blazed.

"If you did that," he said quietly, "I would never see, or speak to you, again."

Olga shivered a little.

"Your honour is mine," he went on. "Remember that."

"It isn't fair," she burst out passionately. "It isn't fair to put it like that. Why should I, and you, and Diana—all of us—be sacrificed for Adrienne?"

"Because you and I are—what we are, and because Diana is my wife."

Olga looked at him curiously.

"Then—if it came to a choice—you would actually sacrifice Diana?"

Errington's face whitened.

"It will not—it shall not!" he said vehemently. "Diana's faith will pull us through."

Olga smiled contemptuously.

"Don't be too sure. After all, a woman's trust won't stand everything, and you're asking a great deal from Diana—a blind faith, under circumstances which might shake the confidence of any one. Already"—she leaned forward a little—"already she is beginning to be jealous of Adrienne."

"And whom have I to thank for that? You—you, from whom, more than from any other, I might have expected loyalty."

Olga shook her head.

"No, not me. But the fact that no wife worth the name will stand quietly by and see her husband at the beck and call of another woman."

"More especially when there is some one who drops poison in her ear day by day," he retorted.

"Yes," she acknowledged frankly. "If I can bring matters to a head, force you to a choice between Adrienne and Diana, I shall do it. And then, before God, Max! I believe you'll free yourself from that woman."

"No," he answered quietly, "I shall not."

"You'll sacrifice Diana?"—incredulously.

A smile of confidence lightened his face.

"I don't think it will come to that. I'm staking—everything—on Diana's trust in me."

"Then you'll lose—lose, I tell you."

"No," he said steadily. "I shall win."

Olga smote her hands together.

"Was there ever such a fool! I tell you, no woman's trust can hold out for ever. And since you can't explain to her——"

"It won't be for ever," he broke in quickly. "Everything goes well. Before long all the concealment will be at an end. And I shall be free."

Olga turned away.

"I can't wish you success," she said bitterly. "The day that brings you success will be the blackest hour of my life."

Errington's face softened a little.

"Olga, you are unreasonable——"

"Unreasonable, am I? Because I grudge paying for the sins of others? . . . If that is unreasonable—yes, then, I *am* unreasonable! Now, go. Go, and remember, Max, we are on opposite sides of the camp."

Errington paused at the door.

"So long as you keep your honour—*our* honour—clean," he said, "do what you like! I have utter, absolute trust in Diana."

CHAPTER XIX

THE "FIRST NIGHT" PERFORMANCE

THE curtain fell amidst a roar of applause, and the lights flashed up over the auditorium once more. It was the first night performance of "Mrs. Fleming's Husband," and the house was packed with the usual crowd of first-nighters, critics, and members of "the" profession who were anxious to see Miss de Gervais in the new part Max Errington had created for her.

Diana and Joan Stair were in a box, escorted only by Jerry, since Max had firmly refused to come down to the theatre for the first performance.

"I can't stand first nights," he had said. "At least, not of my own plays." And not even Diana's persuasions had availed to move him from this decision.

Joan was ecstatic in her praise.

"Isn't Adrienne simply wonderful?" she exclaimed, as the music of the *entr'acte* stole out from the hidden orchestra.

"'M, yes." Diana's reply lacked enthusiasm.

Joan, if she could not boast great powers of intuition, was dowered with a keen observation, and she had not spent a week at Lilac Lodge without putting two and two together and making four of them. She had noticed a great change in Diana. The girl was moody and unusually silent; her gay good spirits had entirely vanished, and more than once Joan had caught her regarding her husband with a curious mixture of resentment and contempt in her eyes. Joan was frankly worried over the state of affairs.

"Why this *nil admirari* attitude?" she asked. "Have you and Adrienne quarrelled?"

"Quarrelled?" Diana raised her brows ever so slightly. "What should we quarrel about? As a matter of fact, I really don't see very much of her nowadays."

"So I imagined," replied Joan calmly. "When I stayed with you last May, either she came to the Lodge, or you went to Somervell Street, every day of the week. This time, you've not seen each other since I came."

"No? I don't think"—lightly—"that Adrienne cares much for members of her own sex. She prefers—their husbands."

Joan stared in amazement. The little acid speech was so unlike Diana that she felt convinced it sprang from some new and strong antagonism towards the actress. What could be the cause of it? Diana and Adrienne had been warm friends only a few months ago!

Joan's eyes travelled from Diana's small, set face to Jerry's pleasant boyish one. The latter had opened his mouth to speak, then thought better of it, and closed it again, reddening uncomfortably, and his dismayed expression was so obvious as to be almost comic.

The rise of the curtain for the third and last act put a summary end to any further conversation, and Joan bent her attention on the stage once more, though all the time that her eyes and ears were absorbing the shifting scenes and brilliant dialogue of the play a little, persistent, inner voice at the back of her brain kept repeating Diana's nonchalant *"I really don't see very much of her nowadays,"* and querying irrepressibly, *"Why not?"*

Meanwhile, Diana, unconscious of the uneasy curiosity she had awakened in the mind of Joan, was watching the progress of the play intently. How designedly it was written around Adrienne de Gervais—calculated to give every possible opportunity to a fine emotional actress! Her lips closed a little more tightly together as the thought took hold

of her. The author must have studied Adrienne, watched her every mood, learned every twist of her temperament, to have portrayed a character so absolutely suited to her as that of Mrs. Fleming. And how could a man know a woman's soul so well unless—unless it were the soul of the woman he loved? That was it; that was the explanation of all those things which had puzzled and bewildered her for so long. And the author was her husband!

Diana, staring down from her box at that exquisite, breathing incarnation of grace on the stage below, felt that she hated Adrienne. She had never hated any one before, and the intensity of her feeling frightened her. Since a few months ago, strange, deep emotions had stirred within her—a passion of love and a passion of hatred such as in the days of her simple girlhood she would not have believed to be possible to any ordinary well-brought-up young Englishwoman. That Max was capable of a fierce heat of passion, she knew. But then, he was not all English; wilder blood ran in his veins. She could imagine his killing a man if driven by the lash of passionate jealousy. But she had never pictured herself obsessed by hate of a like quality.

And yet, now, as her eyes followed Adrienne's slender figure, with its curious little air of hauteur that always set her so apart from other women, moving hither and thither on the stage, her hands clenched themselves fiercely, and her grey eyes dilated with the intensity of her hatred. Almost—almost she could understand how men and women killed each other in the grip of a jealous love. . . .

The play was ended. Adrienne had bowed repeatedly in response to the wild enthusiasm of the audience, and of a sudden a new cry mingled with the shouts and clapping.

"Author! Author!"

Adrienne came forward again and bowed, smilingly shaking her head, gesturing a negative with her hands. But still the cry went on, "Author! Author!"—the steady, per-

sistent drone of an audience which does not mean to be denied.

Diana experienced a brief thrill of triumph. She felt convinced that Adrienne would have liked to have Max standing beside her at this moment. It would have set the seal on an evening of glorious success, completed it, as it were. And he had refused to come, declined—so Diana put it to herself—to share the evening's triumph with the actress who had so well interpreted his work. At least this would be a pin-prick in the enemy's side!

And then—then—a hand pulled aside the heavy folds of the stage curtain, and the next moment Max and Adrienne were standing there together, bowing and smiling, while the audience roared and cheered its enthusiasm.

Diana could hardly believe her eyes. Max had told her so emphatically that he would not come. And now, he was here! He had lied to her! The affair had been pre-arranged between him and Adrienne all the time! Only she—the wife!—had been kept in the dark. Probably he had spent the entire evening behind the scenes. . . . In her overwrought condition, no supposition was too wild for credence.

Vaguely she heard some one at the back of the house shout "Speech!" and the cry was taken up by a dozen voices, but Max only laughed and shook his head, and once more the heavy curtains fell together, shutting him and Adrienne from her sight.

Mechanically Diana gathered up her wraps and prepared to leave the box.

"Aren't you coming round behind to congratulate them, Mrs. Errington?"

Jerry's astonished tones broke on her ears as she turned down the corridor in the direction of the vestibule.

"No," she replied quietly. "I'm going home."

. . . . . .

"You told me you wouldn't come to the theatre—and you intended going all the time!"

Diana's wraps were flung on the chair beside her, and she stood, a slim, pliant figure in her white evening gown, defiantly facing her husband.

"No, I'd no intention of going. I detest first nights," he answered.

"Then why were you there? Oh, I don't believe it—I don't believe it! You simply wanted to spend the evening with Adrienne; that was why you refused to go with me."

"Diana!" Max spoke incredulously. "You can't believe —you can't think that!"

"But I do think that!"—imperiously. "What else can I think?" Her long-pent jealousy had broken forth at last, and the words raced from her lips. "You refused to come when I asked you—offered me Jerry as an escort instead. Jerry!"—scornfully—"I'm to be content with my husband's secretary, I suppose, so that my husband himself can dance attendance on Adrienne de Gervais?"

Max stood motionless, his eyes like steel.

"You are being—rather childish," he said at last, with slow deliberation. His cool, contemptuous tones cut like a whip.

She had been rapidly losing her self-command, and, reading the intense anger beneath his outward calm, she made an effort to pull herself together.

"Childish?" she retorted. "Yes, I suppose it is childish to mind being deceived. I ought to have been prepared for it—expected it."

At the note of suffering in her voice the anger died swiftly out of his eyes.

"You don't mean that, Diana," he said, more gently.

"Yes, I do. You warned me—didn't you?—that there would be things you couldn't explain. I suppose"—bitterly —"this is one of them!"

"No, it is not. I can explain this. I didn't intend com-

ing to-night, as I told you. But Miss de Gervais rang up from the theatre and begged me to come, so, of course, as she wished it——"

"'As she wished it!' Are her wishes, then, of so much more importance than mine?"

Errington was silent for a moment. At last he replied quietly:—

"You know they are not. But in this case, in the matter of the play, she is entitled to every consideration."

Diana's eyes searched his face. Beneath the soft laces of her gown her breast still rose and fell stormily, but she had herself in hand now.

"Max, when I married you I took . . . something . . . on trust." She spoke slowly, weighing her words, "But I didn't expect that something to include—Adrienne! What has she to do with you?"

Errington's brows came sharply together. He drew a quick, short breath as though bracing himself to meet some unforeseen danger.

"I've written a play for her," he answered shortly.

"Yes, I know. But is that all that there is between you —this play?"

"I can't answer that question," he replied quietly.

Diana flung out her hand with a sudden, passionate gesture.

"You've answered it, I think," she said scornfully.

He took a quick stride towards her, catching her by the arms.

"Diana"—his voice vibrated—"won't you trust me?"

"Trust you! How can I?" she broke out wildly. "If trusting you means standing by whilst Adrienne—— Oh, I can't bear it. You're asking too much of me, Max. I didn't know . . . when you asked me to trust you . . . that it meant—*this!* . . . And there's something else, too. Who are you? What is your real name? I don't even know"—bitterly—"whom I've married!"

He released her suddenly, almost as though she had struck him.

"Who has been talking to you?" he demanded thickly. *"Then it's true?"*

Diana's hands fell to her sides and every drop of colour drained away from her face. The question had been lying dormant in her mind ever since the day when Olga Lermontof had first implanted it there. Now it had sprung from her lips, dragged forth by the emotion of the moment. *And he couldn't answer it!*

"Then it's true?" she repeated.

Errington's face set like a mask.

"That is a question you shouldn't have asked," he replied coldly.

"And one you cannot answer?"

He bent his head.

"And one I cannot answer."

Very slowly she picked up her wraps.

"Thank you," she said unsteadily. "I'll—I'll go now."

He laid his hand deliberately on the door-handle.

"No," he said. "No, you won't go. I've heard what you have to say; now you'll listen to me. Good God, Diana!" he continued passionately. "Do you think I'm going to stand quietly by and see our happiness wrecked?"

"I don't see how you can prevent it," she said dully.

"I? No; I can do nothing. But you can. Diana, beloved, have faith in me! I can't explain these things to you—not now. Some day, please God, I shall be able to, but till that day comes—trust me!" There was a depth of supplication and entreaty in his tone, but it left her unmoved. She felt frozen—passionless.

"Do you mean—do you mean that Adrienne, your name, everything, is all part of—of what you can't tell me? Part of—the shadow?"

He was silent a moment. Then he answered steadily:—

"Yes. That much I may tell you."

She put up her hand and pushed back her hair impatiently from her forehead.

"I can't understand it . . . I can't understand it," she muttered.

"Dear, must one understand—to love? . . . Can't you have faith?"

His eyes, those blue eyes of his which could be by turns so fierce, so unrelenting, and—did she not know it to her heart's undoing?—so unutterably tender, besought her. But, for once, they awakened no response. She felt cold—quite cold and indifferent.

"No, Max," she answered wearily. "I don't think I can. You ask me to believe that there is need for you to see so much of Adrienne. At first you said it was because of the play. Now you say it has to do with this—this thing I may not know. . . . I'm afraid I can't believe it. I think a man's wife should come first—first of anything. I've tried—oh, I've tried not to mind when you left me so often to go to Adrienne. I used to tell myself that it was only on account of the play. I tried to believe it, because—because I loved you so. But"—with a bitter little smile—"I don't think I ever *really* believed it—I only cheated myself. . . . There's something else, too—the shadow. Baroni knows what it is—and Olga Lermontof. Only I—your wife—I know nothing."

She paused, as though expecting some reply, but Max remained silent, his arms folded across his chest, his head a little bent.

"I was only a child when you married me, Max," she went on presently. "I didn't realise what it meant for a husband to have some secret business which he cannot tell his wife. But I know now what it means. It's merely an excuse to be always with another woman——"

In a stride Max was beside her, his eyes blazing, his hands gripping her shoulders with a clasp that hurt her.

"How dare you?" he exclaimed. "Unsay that—take it back? Do you hear?"

She shrank a little, twisting in his grasp, but he held her remorselessly.

"No, I won't take it back. . . . Ah! Let me go, Max, you're hurting me!"

He released her instantly, and, as his hands fell away from her shoulders, the white flesh reddened into bars where his fingers had gripped her. His eyes rested for a moment on the angry-looking marks, and then, with an inarticulate cry, he caught her to him, pressing his lips against the bruised flesh, against her eyes, her mouth, crushing her in his arms.

She lay there passively; but her body stiffened a little, and her lips remained quite still and unresponsive beneath his.

"Diana! . . . Beloved! . . ."

She thrust her hands against his chest.

"Let me go," she whispered breathlessly. "Let me go. I can't bear you to touch me."

With a quick, determined movement she freed herself, and stood a little away from him, panting.

"Don't ever . . . do that . . . again. I—I can't bear you to touch me . . . not now."

She made a wavering step towards the door. He held it open for her, and in silence she passed out and up the stairs. Presently, from the landing above, he heard the lock of her bedroom door click into its socket. . . .

CHAPTER XX

THE SHADOW FALLS

BREAKFAST, the following morning, was something of an ordeal. Neither Max nor Diana spoke to each other if speech could be avoided, and, when this was impossible, they addressed each other with a frigid politeness that was more painful than the silence.

Jerry and Joan, sensing the antagonism in the atmosphere, endeavoured to make conversation, but their efforts received scant encouragement, and both were thankful when the meal came to an end, and they were free to seek refuge in another room, leaving husband and wife alone together.

Diana glanced a trifle nervously at her husband as the door closed behind them. There was a coldness, an aloofness about him, that reminded her vividly of the early days of their acquaintanceship, when his cool indifference of manner had set a barrier between them which her impulsive girlhood had been powerless to break through.

"Will you spare me a few minutes in my study?" he said. His face was perfectly impassive; only the peculiar brilliancy of his eyes spoke of the white-hot anger he was holding in leash.

Diana nodded silently. For a moment, bereft of words, she quailed before the knowledge of that concentrated anger, but by the time they had reached his study she had pulled herself together, and was ready to face him with a high temper almost equal to his own.

She had had the night for reflection, and the sense of bitter injustice under which she was labouring had roused

in her the same dogged, unbending obstinacy which, in a much smaller way, had evinced itself when Baroni had thrown the music at her and had subsequently bade her pick it up.

But now that sense of wild rebellion against injustice, against personal injury, was magnified a thousandfold. For months she had been drifting steadily apart from her husband, acutely conscious of that secret thing in his life, and fiercely resentful of its imperceptible, yet binding influence on all his actions. Again and again she had been perplexed and mystified by certain incomprehensible things which she had observed—for instance, the fact that, as she knew, part of Max's correspondence was conducted in cipher; that at times he seemed quite unaccountably worried and depressed; and, above all, that he was for ever at the beck and call of Adrienne de Gervais.

Gradually she had begun to connect the two things—Adrienne, and that secret which dwelt like a shadowy menace at the back of everything. It was clear, too, that they were also linked together in the minds both of Baroni and Olga Lermontof—a dropped sentence here, a hint there, had assured her of that.

Then had come Olga's definite suggestion, "Adrienne de Gervais is a bad friend for the man one loves!" And from that point onward Diana had seen new meanings in all that passed between her husband and the actress, and a blind jealousy had taken possession of her. Something out of the past bound her husband and Adrienne together, of that she felt convinced. She believed that the knowledge which Max had chosen to withhold from her—his wife—he shared with Adrienne—and all Diana's fierce young sense of possession rose up in opposition.

Last night, the sight of her husband and the actress, standing together on the stage, had seemed to her to epitomise their relative positions—Max and Adrienne, working to-

gether, fully in each other's confidence, whilst she herself was the outsider, only the onlooker in the box!

"Well?" she said, defiantly turning to her husband. "Well? What is it you wish to say to me?"

"I want an explanation of your conduct—last night."

"And I," she retorted impetuously, "I want an explanation of your conduct—ever since we've been married!"

He swept her demand aside as though it were the irresponsible prattle of a child, ignored it utterly. He was conscious of only one thing—that she had barred herself away from him, humiliated him, dealt their mutual love a blow beneath which it reeled.

The bolted door itself counted for nothing. What mattered was that it was she who had closed it, deliberately choosing to shut him outside her life, and cutting every cord of love and trust and belief that bound them together.

An Englishman might have stormed or laughed, as the mood took him, and comforted himself with the reflection that she would "get over it." But not so Max. The sensitiveness which he hid from the world at large, but which revealed itself in the lines of that fine-cut mouth of his, winced under the humiliation she had put upon him. Love, in his idea, was a thing so delicate, so rare, that Diana's crude handling of the situation bore for him a far deeper meaning than the impulsive, headlong action of the overwrought girl had rightly held. To Max, it signified the end —the denial of all the exquisite trust and understanding which love should represent. If she could think for an instant that he would have asked aught from her at a moment when they were so far apart in spirit, then she had not understood the ideal oneness of body and soul which love signified to him, and the knowledge that she had actually sought to protect herself from him had hurt him unbearably.

"Last night," he said slowly, "you showed me that you have no trust, no faith in me any longer."

And Diana, misunderstanding, thinking of the secret

which he would not share with her, and impelled by the jealousy that obsessed her, replied impetuously:—

"Yes, I meant to show you that. You refuse me your confidence, and expect me to believe in you! You set me aside for Adrienne de Gervais, and then you ask me to—*trust* you? How can I? . . . I'm not a fool, Max."

"So it's that? The one thing over which I asked your faith?" The limitless scorn in his voice lashed her.

"You had no right to ask it!" she broke out bitterly. "Oh, you knew what it would mean. I, I was too young to realise. I didn't think—I didn't understand what a horrible thing a secret between husband and wife might be. But I can't bear it—I can't bear it any longer! I sometimes wonder," she added slowly, "if you ever loved me?"

"If I ever loved you?" he repeated. "There has never been any other woman in the world for me. There never will be."

The utter, absolute conviction of his tones knocked at her heart, but fear and jealousy were stronger than love.

"Then prove it!" she retorted. "Take me into your confidence; put Adrienne out of your life."

"It isn't possible—not yet," he said wearily. "You're asking what I cannot do."

She took a step nearer.

"Tell me this, then. What did Olga Lermontof mean when she bade me ask your name? Oh!"—with a quick intake of her breath—"you *must* answer that, Max; you *must* tell me that. I have a *right* to know it!"

For a moment he was silent, while she waited, eager-eyed, tremulously appealing, for his answer. At last it came.

"No," he said inflexibly. "You have no—right—to ask anything I haven't chosen to tell you. When you gave me your love, you gave me your faith, too. I warned you what it might mean—but you gave it. And I"—his voice deepened—"I worshipped you for it! . . . But I see now, I asked

too much of you. More"—cynically—"than any woman has to give."

"Then—then"—her voice trembled—"you mean you won't tell me anything more?"

"I can't."

"And—and Adrienne? Everything must go on just the same?"

"Just the same"—implacably.

She looked at him curiously.

"And you expect me still to feel the same towards you, I suppose? To behave as though nothing had come between us?"

For a moment his control gave way.

"I expect nothing," he said hoarsely. "I shall never ask you for anything again—neither love nor friendship. As you have decreed, so it shall be!"

Slowly, with bent head, Diana turned and left the room.

So this was the end! She had made her appeal, risked everything on his love for her—and lost. Adrienne de Gervais was stronger than she!

Hereafter, she supposed, they would live as so many other husbands and wives lived—outwardly good friends, but actually with all the beautiful links of love and understanding shattered and broken.

. . . . . .

"Since the first night of the play they've hardly said a word to each other—only when it's absolutely necessary." Joan spoke dejectedly, her chin cupped in her hand.

Jerry nodded.

"I know," he agreed. "It's pretty awful."

He and Joan were having tea alone together, cosily, by the library fire. Diana had gone out to a singing-lesson, and Errington was shut up in his study attending to certain letters, written in cipher—letters which reached him frequently, bearing a foreign postmark, and the answers to which he never by any chance dictated to his secretary.

"Surely they can't have quarrelled, just because he didn't come to the theatre with us that night," pursued Joan. "Do you think Diana could have been offended because he came down afterwards to please Miss Gervais?"

"Partly that. But it's a lot of things together, really. I've seen it coming. Diana's been getting restive for some time. There are—Look here! I don't wish to pry into what's not my business, but a fellow can't live in a house without seeing things, and there's something in Errington's life which Di knows nothing about. And it's that—just the not knowing—which is coming between them."

"Well, then, why on earth doesn't he tell her about it, whatever it is?"

Jerry shrugged his shoulders.

"Can't say. *I* don't know what it is; it's not my business to know. But his wife's another proposition altogether."

"I suppose he expects her to trust him over it," said Joan thoughtfully.

"That's about the size of it. And Diana isn't taking any."

"I should trust him with anything in the world—a man with that face!" observed Joan, after a pause.

"There you go!" cried Jerry discontentedly. "There you go, with your unfailing faith in the visible object. A man's got to *look* a hero before you think twice about him! Mark my words, Jo—many a saint's face has hidden the heart of a devil."

Joan surveyed him consideringly.

"I've never observed that you have a saint's face, Jerry," she remarked calmly.

"Beast! Joan"—he made a dive for her hand, but she eluded him with the skill of frequent practice—"how much longer are you going to keep me on tenterhooks? You know I'm the prodigal son, and that I'm only waiting for you to say 'yes,' to return to the family bosom——"

"And you propose to use me as a stepping stone! I know. You think that if you return as an engaged young man——"

"With a good reference from my last situation," interpolated Jerry, grinning.

"Yes—that too, then your father will forget all your peccadilloes and say, 'Bless you, my children'——"

"Limelight on the blushing bur-ride! And they lived happily ever after! Yes, that's it! Jolly good programme, isn't it?"

And somehow Jerry's big boyish arm slipped itself round Joan's shoulders—and Joan raised no objections.

"But—about Max and Diana?" resumed Miss Stair after a judicious interval.

"Well, what about them?"

"Can't we—can't we do anything? Talk to them?"

"I just see myself talking to Errington!" murmured Jerry. "I'd about as soon discuss its private and internal arrangements with a volcano! My dear kid, it all depends upon Diana and whether she's content to trust her husband or not. *I'd* trust Max through thick and thin, and no questions asked. If he blew up the Houses of Parliament, I should believe he'd some good reason for doing it. . . . But then, I'm not his wife!"

"Well, I shall talk to Diana," said Joan seriously. "I'm sure Dad would, if he were here. And I do think, Jerry, you might screw up courage to speak to Max. He can't eat you! And—and I simply hate to see those two at cross purposes! They were so happy at the beginning."

The mention of matrimonial happiness started a new train of thought, and the conversation became of a more personal nature—the kind of conversation wherein every second or third sentence starts with "when we are married," and thence launches out into rose-red visions of the great adventure.

Presently the house door clanged, and a minute later Diana came into the room. She threw aside her furs and looked round hastily.

"Where's Max?" she asked sharply.

"Not concealed beneath the Chesterfield," volunteered Jerry flippantly. Then, as he caught a hostile sparkle of irritation in her grey eyes, he added hastily, "He's in his study."

Diana nodded, and, without further remark, went away in search of her husband.

"Are you busy, Max?" she asked, pausing on the threshold of the room where he was working.

He rose at once, placing a chair for her with the chilly courtesy which he had accorded her since their last interview in this same room.

"Not too busy to attend to you," he replied. "Where will you sit? By the fire?"

Diana shook her head. She was a little flushed, and her eyes were bright with some suppressed excitement.

"No thanks," she replied. "I only came to tell you that I've been having a talk with Baroni about my voice, and—and that I've decided to begin singing again this winter—professionally, I mean. It seems a pity to waste any more time."

She spoke rapidly, and with a certain nervousness.

For an instant a look of acute pain leaped into Errington's eyes, but it was gone almost at once, and he turned to her composedly.

"Is that the only reason, Diana?" he said. "The waste of time?"

She was silent a moment, busying herself stripping off her gloves. Presently she looked up, forcing herself to meet his gaze.

"No," she said steadily. "It isn't."

"May I know the—other reasons?"

Her lip curled.

"I should have thought they were obvious. Our marriage has been a mistake. It's a failure. And I can't bear this life any longer. . . . I must have something to do."

"Need we live like this?" he asked suddenly. "Strangers

to each other in our own home? It was your decree, remember . . . that night . . . when you locked your door against me."

She looked at him defiantly.

"It has been locked every night . . . since."

A glint of slumbering fire showed itself in his eyes.

"I know." His voice shook a little. "Sometimes . . . I wonder I haven't robbed you of the key!"

"Oh no!—no!" She shrank away from him, and the fear in her eyes made him wince.

"Do you hate me so much then?" He spoke with intense weariness. "You needn't be afraid—I won't ask for what you can't give, Diana. I'm to blame. I ought never to have married you. And I'll pay the price you've fixed. Perhaps—some day—we shall find happiness again together——"

"No," she broke in quickly. "We shan't do that. I think you've killed my love, Max. This secret of yours—it's like a great wall between us. We can't ever get near to each other because of it, and because of—Adrienne."

He gave a short laugh.

"If only you knew how little you need resent my friendship with Adrienne!"

Diana took a step towards him.

"Then give her up!" she said. "Cut her out of your life. If—if you did that, Max——" She broke off, but her eyes, suddenly radiant and misty, told him all that a man need know.

"If I did that—you would come back to me?" The words leaped from his lips.

She bent her head, still with that soft shining in her eyes.

There was a long pause. Errington's eyes were fixed on hers, his face tense with some inward struggle. Once he made a groping movement towards her, but his arms fell limply again to his side. At last—

"I can't!" he said hoarsely. "I can't do what you ask."

Instantly the light died out of her face.

"Then that is the end," she said coldly. "I don't think we need discuss the matter again. There need be no gossip. So long as I live in your house and bear your name—that's all the world demands of us. I shall go back to my profession, and—and I suppose we can be decently civil to each other? That's all, I think."

Suddenly Errington threw back his shoulders.

"No," he said, and there was almost a ring of triumph in his voice. "It's not all. Your love is no more dead than mine! Love *doesn't* die; and you won't be able to bear this miserable farce of a life that you're planning for us."

She turned on him swiftly.

"My pride's greater than my love, Max. If ever the time comes when I can't bear it—I shall go away."

The door closed behind her, and for a moment Max stood silently staring into space, the bitter threat of her last words ringing in his ears. Then he dropped into a chair, his face hidden in his arms.

"God!" he muttered. "God! Is there no way out?"

CHAPTER XXI

THE OTHER WOMAN

CARLO BARONI'S joy knew no bounds when he understood that Diana had definitely decided to return to the concert platform. His first action was to order her away for a complete change and rest, so she and Joan obediently packed their trunks and departed to Switzerland, where they forgot for a time the existence of such things as London fogs, either real or figurative, and threw themselves heart and soul into the winter sports that were going forward.

The middle of February found them once more in England, and Joan rejoined her father, while Diana went back to Lilac Lodge. She was greatly relieved to discover that the break had simplified several problems and made it much easier for her to meet her husband and begin life again on fresh terms. Max, indeed, seemed to have accepted the new *régime* with that same mocking philosophy with which he invariably faced the problems of life—and which so successfully cloaked his hurt from prying eyes.

He was uniformly kind in his manner to his wife—with that light, half-cynical kindness which he had accorded her in the train on their first memorable journey together, and which effectually set them as far apart from each other as though they stood at the opposite ends of the earth.

Unreasonably enough, Diana bitterly resented this attitude. Womanlike, she made more than one attempt to reopen the matter over which they had quarrelled, but each was skilfully turned aside, and the fact that after his one rejected effort at reconciliation, Max had calmly accepted the new order of things, added fuel to the jealous fire that

burned within her. She told herself that if he still cared for her, if he were not utterly absorbed in Adrienne de Gervais, he would never have rested until he had restored the old, happy relations between them.

Instinctively she sought to dull the pain at her heart by plunging headlong into professional life. Her voice, thanks to the rest and change of her visit to Switzerland, had regained all its former beauty, and her return to the concert platform was received with an outburst of popular enthusiasm. The newspapers devoted half a column apiece to the subject, and several of them prophesied that it was in grand opera that Madame Diana Quentin would eventually find the setting best suited to her gifts.

"Mere concert work"—wrote one critic—"will never give her the scope which both her temperament and her marvellous voice demand."

And with this opinion Baroni cordially concurred. It was his ultimate ambition for Diana that she should study for grand opera, and she herself, only too thankful to find something that would occupy her thoughts and take her right out of herself, as it were, enabling her to forget the overthrow of her happiness, flung herself into the work with enthusiasm.

Gradually, as time passed on, her bitter feelings towards Max softened a little. That light, half-ironical manner he had assumed brought back to her so vividly the Max Errington of the early days of their acquaintance that it recalled, too, a measure of the odd attraction he had held for her in that far-away time.

That he still visited Adrienne very frequently she was aware, but often, on his return from Somervell Street, he seemed so much depressed that she began at last to wonder whether those visits were really productive of any actual enjoyment. Possibly she had misjudged them—her husband and her friend—and it might conceivably be really only business matters which bound them together after all.

If so—if that were true—how wantonly she had flung away her happiness!

Late one afternoon, Max, who had been out since early morning, came in looking thoroughly worn out. His eyes, ringed with fatigue, held an alert look of strain and anxiety for which Diana was at a loss to account.

She was at the piano when he entered the room, idly trying over some MS. songs that had been submitted by aspiring composers anxious to secure her interest.

"Why, Max," she exclaimed, genuine concern in her voice, as she rose from the piano. "How worried you look! What is the matter?"

"Nothing," he returned. "At least, nothing in which you can help," he added hastily. "Unless——"

"Unless what? Please . . . let me help . . . if I can." Diana spoke rather nervously. She was suddenly struck by the fact that the last few months had been responsible for a great change in her husband's appearance. He looked much thinner and older than formerly, she thought. There were harassed lines in his face, and its worn contours and shadowed eyes called aloud to the compassionate womanhood within her, to the mother-instinct that involuntarily longs to heal and soothe.

"Tell me what I can do, Max?"

A smile curved his lips, half whimsical, half sad.

"You can do for me what you do for all the rest of the world—I won't ask more of you," he replied. "Sing to me."

Diana coloured warmly. The first part of his speech stung her unbearably.

"Sing to you?" she repeated.

"Yes. I'm very tired, and nothing is more restful than music." Then, as she hesitated, he added, "Unless, of course, I'm asking too much."

"You know you are not," she answered swiftly.

She resumed her place at the piano, and, while he lay back in his chair with closed eyes, she sang to him—the

music of the old masters who loved melody, and into whose songs the bitterness and unrest of the twentieth century had not crept.

Presently, she thought, he slept, and very softly her hands strayed into the simple, sorrowful music of "The Haven of Memory," and a note of wistful appeal, not all of art, added a new depth to the exquisite voice.

> How once your love
> But crowned and blessed me only,
> Long and long ago.

The refrain died into silence, and Diana, looking up, found Max's piercing blue eyes fixed upon her. He was not asleep, then, after all.

He smiled slightly as their glances met.

"Do you remember I once told you I thought 'The Hell of Memory' would be a more appropriate title? . . . I was quite right."

"Max—" Diana's voice quavered and broke.

A sudden eager light sprang into his face. Swiftly he came to her side and stood looking down at her.

"Diana," he said tensely, "must it always remain—the hell of memory?"

They were very near to each other in that moment; the great wall fashioned of jealousy and distrust was tottering to its foundations.

And then, from the street below came the high-pitched, raucous sound of the newsboy's voice:—

"Attempted Murder of Miss Adrian Jervis! Premier Theatre Besieged."

The words, with their deadly import, cut between husband and wife like a sword.

"Good God!" The exclamation burst from Max with a cry of horror. In an instant he was out of the room, down the stairs, and running bareheaded along the street in pursuit of the newsboy, and a few seconds later he was back with a newspaper, damp from the press, in his hands.

Diana had remained sitting just as he had left her. She felt numbed. The look of dread and consternation that had leaped into her husband's face, as the news came shrilling up from the street below, had told her, more eloquently than any words could do, how absolutely his life was bound up in that of Adrienne de Gervais. A man whose heart's desire has been suddenly snatched from him might look so; no other.

Max, oblivious of everything else, was reading the brief newspaper account at lightning speed. At last—

"I must go!" he said. "I must go round to Somervell Street at once."

When he had gone, Diana picked up the newspaper from the floor where he had tossed it, and smoothing out its crumpled sheet, proceeded to read the short paragraph, surmounted by staring head-lines, which had sent her husband hurrying hot-foot to Adrienne's house.

"Murderous Attack on Miss Adrienne de Gervais.

"As Miss Adrienne de Gervais, the popular actress, was leaving the Premier Theatre after the matinée performance to-day, a man rushed out from a side street and fired three shots at her, wounding her severely. Miss de Gervais was carried into the theatre, where a doctor who chanced to be passing rendered first aid. Within a very few minutes the news of the outrage became known and the theatre was besieged by inquirers. The would-be assassin, who made good his escape, was a man of unmistakably foreign appearance."

Diana laid the paper down very quietly. This, then, was the news which had power to bring that look of fear and dread to her husband's face—which could instantly wipe out from his mind all thoughts of his wife and of everything that concerned her.

Perhaps, she reflected scornfully, it was as well that the revelation had come when it did! Otherwise—otherwise, she had been almost on the verge of forgetting her just cause for jealousy, forgetting all the past months of misery, and believing in her husband once again.

The trill of the telephone from below checked her bitter thoughts, and hurrying downstairs into the hall, she lifted the receiver and held it to her ear.

"Yes. Who is it?"

Possibly something was wrong with the wire, or perhaps it was only that Diana's voice, particularly deep and low-pitched for a woman, misled the speaker at the other end. Whatever it may have been, Adrienne's voice, rather tremulous and shaky, came through the 'phone, and she was obviously under the impression that she was speaking to Diana's husband.

"Oh, is that you, Max? Don't be frightened. I'm not badly hurt. I hear it's already in the papers, and as I knew you'd be nearly mad with anxiety, I've made the doctor let me 'phone you myself. Of course you can guess who did it. It was not the man you caught waiting about outside the theatre. It was the taller one of the two we saw at Charing Cross that day. Please come round as soon as you can."

Diana's lips set in a straight line. Very deliberately she replaced the receiver and rang off without reply. A small, fine smile curved her lips as she reflected that, within a few minutes, Max's arrival at Somervell Street would enlighten Miss de Gervais as to the fact that she had been pouring out her reassuring remarks to the wrong person.

Half an hour later Diana came slowly downstairs, dressed for dinner. Jerry was waiting for her in the hall.

"There's a 'phone message just come through from Max," he said, a trifle awkwardly. (Jerry had not lived through the past few months at Lilac Lodge without realising the terms on which the Erringtons stood with each other.) "He won't be back till late."

Diana bestowed her sweetest smile upon him.

"Then we shall be dining *tête-à-tête*. How nice! Come along."

She took his arm and they went in together.

"This is a very serious thing about Miss de Gervais, isn't it?" she said conversationally, as they sat down.

"A dastardly business," assented Jerry, with indignation.

"I suppose—did Max give you any further particulars?"

"The bullet's broken her arm just above the elbow. Of course she won't be able to play for some time to come."

"How her understudy must be rejoicing," murmured Diana reflectively.

"It seems," pursued Jerry, "that the shot was fired by some shady actor fellow. Down on his luck, you know, and jealous of Miss de Gervais' success. At least, that's what they suspect, and Max has 'phoned me to send a paragraph to all the morning papers to that effect."

"That's very curious," commented Diana.

"Why? I should think it's a jolly good guess."

Diana smiled enigmatically.

"Anyhow, it sounds a very natural supposition," she agreed lightly, and then switched the conversation on to other subjects. Jerry, however, seemed rather absent and distrait, and presently, when at last the servants had handed the coffee and withdrawn, he blurted out:—

"It sounds beastly selfish of me, but this affair has upset my own little plans rather badly."

"Yours, Jerry?" said Diana kindly. "How's that? Give me a cigarette and tell me what's gone wrong."

"What would Baroni say to your smoking?" queried Jerry, as he tendered his case and held a match for her to light her cigarette.

"I'm not singing anywhere for a week," laughed Diana. "So this orgy is quite legitimate." And she inhaled luxuriously. "Now, go on, Jerry, what plans of yours have been upset?"

"Well"—Jerry reddened—"I wrote to my governor the other day. It—it was to please Joan, you know."

Diana nodded, her grey eyes dancing.

"Of course," she said gravely, "I quite understand."

"And—and here's his answer!"

He opened his pocket-book, and extracting a letter from the bundle it contained, handed it to Diana.

"You mean you want me to read this?"

"Please."

Diana unfolded it, and read the following terse communication:—

"Come home and bring the lady. Am fattening the calf. —Your affectionate Father."

"Jerry, I should adore your father," said Diana, as she gave him back the letter. "He must be a perfect gem amongst parents."

"He's not a bad old chap," acknowledged Jerry, as he replaced the paternal invitation in his pocket-book. "But you see the difficulty? I was going to ask Errington to give me a few days' leave, and I don't like to bother him now that he has all this worry about Miss de Gervais on his hands."

Diana flushed hotly at Jerry's tacit acceptance of the fact that Adrienne's affairs were naturally of so much moment to her husband. It was another pin-prick in the wound that had been festering for so long. She ignored it, however, and answered quietly:—

"Yes, I see. Perhaps you had better leave it for a few days. What about Pobs? He'll have to be consulted in the matter, won't he?"

"I told him, long ago, that I wanted Joan. Before"—with a grin—"I ever summoned up pluck to tell Joan herself! He was a brick about it, but he thought I ought to make it up with the governor before Joan and I were formally engaged. So I did—and I'm jolly glad of it. And

now I want to go down to Crailing, and fetch Joan, and take her with me to Abbotsleigh. So I should want at least a week off."

"Well, wait till Max comes back," advised Diana. "We shall know more about the matter then. And—and—Jerry!" She stretched out her hand, which immediately disappeared within Jerry's big, boyish fist. "Good luck, old boy!"

. . . . . .

Max returned at about ten o'clock, and Diana proceeded to offer polite inquiries about Miss de Gervais' welfare. She wondered if he would remember how near they had been to each other just for an instant before the news of the attempt upon Adrienne's life had reached them.

But apparently he had forgotten all about it. His thoughts were entirely concerned with Adrienne, and he was unusually grave and preoccupied.

He ordered a servant to bring him some sandwiches and a glass of wine, and when he and Diana were once more alone, he announced abruptly:—

"I shall have to leave home for a few days."

"Leave home?" echoed Diana.

"Yes. Adrienne must go out of town, and I'm going to run down to some little country place and find rooms for her and Mrs. Adams."

"Find rooms?" Diana stared at him amazedly. "But surely—won't they go to Red Gables?"

Max shook his head.

"No. It wouldn't be safe after this—this affair. The same brute might try to get her again. You see, it's quite well known that she has a house at Crailing."

"Who is it that is such such an enemy of hers?"

Max hesitated a moment.

"It might very well be some former actor, some poor devil of a fellow down on his luck, who has brooded over his fancied wrongs till he was half-mad," he said, at length.

Diana's eyes flashed. So that item of news intended for the morning papers was also to be handed out for home consumption!

"What steps are you taking to trace the man?"

Again Max paused before replying. To Diana, his hesitation strengthened her conviction that he was, as usual, withholding something from her.

"Well?" she repeated. "What steps are you taking?"

"None," he answered at last reluctantly. "Adrienne doesn't wish any fuss made over the matter."

And yet, Diana reflected, both her husband and Miss de Gervais knew quite well who the assailant was! "The taller of the two," Adrienne had said through the telephone. Why, then, with that clue in her hands, did she refuse to prosecute?

Suddenly, into Diana's mind flashed an answer to the question—to the multitude of questions which had perplexed her for so long. She felt as a traveller may who has been journeying along an unknown way in the dark, hurt and bruised by stones and pitfalls he could not see, when suddenly a light shines out, revealing all the dangers of the path.

The explanation of all those perplexities and suspicions of the past was so simple, so obvious, that she marvelled why it had never occurred to her before. Adrienne de Gervais was neither more or less than an adventuress—one of the vampire type of woman who preys upon mankind, drawing them into her net by her beauty and charm, even as she had drawn Max himself! This, this supplied the key to the whole matter—all that had gone before, and all that was now making such a mockery of her married life.

And the "poor devil of a fellow" who had attempted Adrienne's life had probably figured largely in her past, one of her dupes, and now, understanding at last what kind of woman it was for whom he had very likely sacrificed all that made existence worth while, he was obsessed with a

crazy desire for vengeance—vengeance at any price. And Adrienne, of course, in her extremity, had turned to her latest captive, Max himself, for protection!

Oh! it was all quite clear now! The scattered pieces of the puzzle were fitting together and making a definite picture.

Stray remarks of Olga Lermontof's came back to her—those little pointed arrows wherewith the Russian had skilfully found out the joints in her armour—"Miss de Gervais is not quite what she seems." And again, "I'm perfectly sure Adrienne de Gervais' past is a closed book to you." Proof positive that Olga had known all along what Diana had only just this moment perceived to be the truth.

Diana's small hands clenched themselves until the nails dug into the soft palms, as she remembered how those same hands had been held out in friendship to this very adventuress—to the woman who had wrecked her happiness, and for whom Max was ready at any time to set her and her wishes upon one side! What a blind, trusting fool she had been! Well, that was all ended now; she knew where she stood. Never again would Max or Adrienne be able to deceive her. The scales had at last fallen from her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Diana"—Max's cool, quiet tones broke in on the torment of her thoughts. "I'm sorry, but I shall probably have to be away several days."

"Have you forgotten we're giving a big reception here next Wednesday?"

"Wednesday, is it? And to-day is Saturday. I shall find rooms somewhere to-morrow, and take Adrienne and Mrs. Adams down to them the next day. . . . No, I can't possibly be back for Wednesday."

"But you must!"—impetuously.

"It's impossible. I shall stay with Adrienne and Mrs. Adams until I'm quite sure that the place is safe for them—that that fellow hasn't traced them and isn't lurking about in the neighbourhood. You mustn't expect me back before

Saturday at the earliest. You and Jerry can manage the reception. I hate those big crowds, as you know."

For a moment Diana sat in stony silence. So he intended to leave her to entertain half London—that half of London that mattered and would talk about it—while he spent a pleasant week philandering down in the country with Adrienne de Gervais, under the ægis of Mrs. Adams' chaperonage!

Very slowly Diana rose to her feet. Her small face was white and set, her little pointed chin thrust out, and her grey eyes were almost black with the intense anger that gripped her.

"Do you mean this?" she asked collectedly.

"Why, of course. Don't you *see* that I must, Diana? I can't let Adrienne run a risk like that."

"But you can subject your wife to an insult like that without thinking twice about it!"—contemptuously. "It hasn't occurred to you, I suppose, what people will say when they find that I have been left entirely alone to entertain our friends, while my husband passes a pleasant week in the country with Miss de Gervais, and her—chaperon? It's an insult to our guests as well as to me. But I quite understand. I, and my friends, simply *don't count* when Adrienne de Gervais wants you."

"I can't help it," he answered stubbornly, her scorn moving him less than the waves that break in a shower of foam at the foot of a cliff. "You knew you would have to trust me."

"Trust you?" cried Diana, shaken out of her composure. "Yes! But I never promised to stand trustingly by while you put another woman in my place. This is the end, Max. I've had enough."

A sudden look of apprehension dawned in his eyes.

"What do you mean?" he asked sharply.

"What do I mean?"—bleakly. "Oh, nothing. I never do mean anything, do I? . . . Well, good-bye. I expect

you'll have left the house before I come down to-morrow morning. I hope . . . you'll enjoy your visit to the country."

She waited a moment, as though expecting some reply; then, as he neither stirred nor spoke, she went quickly out of the room, closing the door behind her.

CHAPTER XXII

THE PARTING OF THE WAYS

"JERRY"—Diana came into her husband's study, where his secretary, who had nothing further to do until his employer's return, was pottering about putting the bookshelves to rights. "Jerry, I'm going to give you a holiday. You can go down to Crailing to-day."

Jerry turned round in surprise.

"But, I say, Diana, I can't, you know—not while Max is away. I'm supposed to make myself useful to you."

"Well, I think you did make yourself—very useful—last night, didn't you?"

"Oh, that!" Jerry shrugged his shoulders. Then, surveying her critically, he added: "You look awfully tired this morning, Di!"

She did. There were purple shadows beneath her eyes, and her face looked white and drawn. The previous evening had been the occasion of her reception, and she had carried it pluckily through single-handed. Quiet and composed, she had moved about amongst her guests, covering Max's absence with a light touch and pretty apology, her demeanour so natural and unembarrassed that the tongues, which would otherwise have wagged swiftly enough, were inevitably stilled.

But the strain had told upon her. This morning she looked haggard and ill, more fit to be in bed than anything else.

"Oh, I shall be all right after a night's rest," she answered cheerfully. "And as to making yourself useful there's

really nothing I want you to do for me. But I *do* want you to go and make your peace with your father, and take Joan to him. I'm sure he'll love her! So I'm writing to Max, telling him that I've given you leave of absence. He won't be returning till Saturday at the earliest, and probably not then. If he wants you back on Monday, we'll wire."

Jerry hesitated.

"Are you sure it will be quite all right? I don't really like leaving you."

"Quite all right," she assured him. "I *did* want you for the party last night, and you were the greatest possible help to me. But now, I don't want you a bit for anything. If you're quick, you can catch the two o'clock down express and"—twinkling—"see Joan this evening."

"Diana, you're a brick!" And Jerry dashed upstairs to pack his suit-case.

Diana heaved a sigh of relief when, a few hours later, a triumphant and joyous Jerry departed in search of a bride. She wanted him out of the house, for that which she had decided to do would be more easily accomplished without the boy's honest, affectionate eyes beseeching her.

All her arrangements were completed, and to-morrow—to-morrow she was going to leave Lilac Lodge for ever. Never again would she share the life of the man who had shown her clearly that, although she was his wife, she counted with him so infinitely less than that other—than Adrienne de Gervais. Her pride might break in the leaving, but it would bend to living under the same roof with him no longer.

Only one thing still remained—to write a letter to her husband and leave it in his study for him to find upon his return. It savoured a little of the theatrical, she reflected, but there seemed no other way possible. She didn't want Max to come in search of her, so she must make it clear to him that she was leaving him deliberately and with no intention of ever returning.

She had told the servants that she was going away on a few days' visit, and after Jerry's departure she gave her maid instructions concerning her packing. She intended to leave the house quite openly the following morning. That was much the easiest method of running away.

"Shall you require me with you, madam?" asked her maid respectfully.

Diana regarded her thoughtfully. She was an excellent servant and thoroughly understood maiding a professional singer; moreover, she was much attached to her mistress. Probably she would be glad of her services later on.

"Oh, if I should make a long stay, I'll send for you, Milling, and you can bring on the rest of my things. I shall want some of my concert gowns the week after next," she told her, in casual tones.

As soon as she had dismissed the girl to her work, Diana made her way into her husband's study, and, seating herself at his desk, drew a sheet of notepaper towards her.

She began to write impulsively, as she did everything else:—

"This is just to say good-bye,"—her pen flew over the paper—"I can't bear our life together any longer, so I'm going away. Perhaps you will blame me because my faith wasn't equal to the task you set it. But I don't think any woman's would be—not if she cared at all. And I did care, Max. It hurts to care as I did—and I'm so tired of being hurt that I'm running away from it. It will be of no use your asking me to return, because I have made up my mind never to come back to you again. I told you that you must choose between Adrienne and me, and you've chosen—Adrienne. I am going to live with Baroni and his sister, Signora Evanci. It is all arranged. They are glad to have me, and it will be much easier for me as regards my singing. So you needn't worry about me.—But perhaps you wouldn't have done!

"Diana.

"P.S.—Please don't be vexed with Jerry for going away. I gave him leave of absence myself, and I told him I would make it all right with you.—D."

She folded the letter with a curious kind of precision, slipped it into an envelope, sealed and addressed it, and propped it up against the inkpot on her husband's desk, so that he could not fail to find it.

Then, when it was time to dress for dinner, she went upstairs and let her maid put her into an evening frock, exactly as though nothing out of the ordinary were going on, just as though to-day—the last day she would ever spend in her husband's home—were no different from any other day.

She made a pretence of eating dinner, and afterwards sat in her own little sitting-room, with a book in front of her, of which she read not a single line.

Presently, when she was quite sure that all the servants had gone to bed, she made a pilgrimage through the house, moving reluctantly from room to room, taking a silent farewell of the place where she had known such happiness—and afterwards, such pain.

At last she went to bed, but she felt too restless and keyed up to sleep, so she slipped into a soft, silken wrapper and established herself in a big easy-chair by the fire.

The latter had died down into a dull, red glow, but she prodded the embers into a flame, adding fresh coal, and as the pleasant warmth of it lapped her round, a feeling of gentle languor gradually stole over her, and at length she slept. . . .

She woke with a start. Some one was trying the handle of the door—very quietly, but yet not at all as though making any attempt to conceal the fact.

Something must be amiss, and one of the maids had come to warn her. The possibility that the house was on fire, or that burglars had broken in, flashed through her mind.

She sprang to her feet, and switching on the light, called out sharply:—

"Who is it?"

She had not fastened the lock overnight, and her heart beat in great suffocating throbs as she watched the handle turn.

The next moment some one came quickly into the room and closed the door.

It was Max!

Diana fell back a step, staring incredulously.

"You!" she exclaimed, breathlessly. *"You!"*

He advanced a few paces into the room. He was very pale, and his face wore a curiously excited expression. His eyes were brilliant—fiercely exultant, yet with an odd gleam of the old, familiar mockery in their depths, as though something in the situation amused him.

"Yes," he said. "Are you surprised to see me?"

"You—you said you were not returning till Saturday," she stammered.

"I found I could get away sooner than I expected, so I caught the last up-train—and here I am."

There was a rakish, devil-may-care note in his voice that filled her with a vague apprehension. Summoning up her courage, she faced him, striving to keep her voice steady.

"And why—why have you come to me—now?"

"I found your note—the note you had left on my desk, so I thought I would like to say good-bye," he answered carelessly.

"You could have waited till to-morrow morning," she returned coldly. "You—you"—she stammered a little, and a faint flush tinged her pallor—"you should not have come . . . here."

A sudden light gleamed in his eyes, mocking and triumphant.

"It is my wife's room. A husband"—slowly—"has certain rights."

"Ah-h!" She caught her breath, and her hand flew to her throat.

"And since," he continued cruelly, never taking his eyes from her face, "since those rights are to be rescinded to-morrow for ever—why, then, to-night——"

"No! . . . No!" She shrank from him, her hands stretched out as though to ward him off.

"You've said 'no' to me for the last six months," he said grimly. "But—that's ended now."

Her eyes searched his face wildly, reading only a set determination in it. Slowly, desperately, she backed away from him; then, suddenly, she made a little rush, and, reaching the door, pulled at the handle. But it remained fast shut.

"It's locked!" she cried, frantically tugging at it. She flashed round upon him. "The key! Where's the key?" The words came sobbingly.

He put his fingers in his pocket.

"Here," he answered coolly.

Despairingly she retreated from the door. There was an expression in his eyes that terrified her—a furnace heat of passion barely held in check. The Englishman within him was in abeyance; the hot, foreign blood was leaping in his veins.

"Max!" she faltered appealingly.

He crossed swiftly to her side, gripping her soft, bare arms in a hold so fierce that his fingers scored them with red weals.

"By God, Diana! What do you think I'm made of?" he burst out violently. "For months you've shut yourself away from me and I've borne it, waiting—waiting always for you to come back to me. Do you think it's been easy?" His limbs were shaking, and his eyes burned into hers. "And now—now you tell me that you've done with me. . . . You take everything from me! My love is to count for nothing!"

"You never loved me!" she protested, with low, breathless vehemence. "It—it could never have been love."

For a moment he was silent, staring at her.

Then he laughed.

"Very well. Call it desire, passion—what you will!" he exclaimed brutally. "But—you married me, you know!"

She cowered away from him, looking to right and left like a trapped animal seeking to escape, but he held her ruthlessly, forcing her to face him.

All at once, her nerve gave way, and she began to cry—helpless, despairing weeping that rocked the slight form in his grasp. As she stood thus, the soft silk of her wrapper falling in straight folds about her, her loosened hair shadowing her white face, she looked pathetically small and young, and Errington suddenly relinquished his hold of her and stepped back, his hands slowly clenching in the effort not to take her in his arms.

Something tugged at his heart, pulling against the desire that ran riot in his veins—something of the infinite tenderness of love which exists side by side with its passion.

"Don't look like that," he said hoarsely. "I'll—I'll go."

He crossed the room, reeling a little in his stride, and, unlocking the door, flung it open.

She stared at him, incredulous relief in her face, while the tears still slid unchecked down her cheeks.

"Max—" she stammered.

"Yes," he returned. "You're free of me. I don't suppose you'll believe it, but I love you too much to . . . take . . what you won't give."

A minute later the door closed behind him and she heard his footsteps descending the stairs.

With a low moan she sank down beside the bed, her face hidden in her hands, sobbing convulsively.

CHAPTER XXIII

PAIN

SUMMER had come and gone, and Diana, after a brief visit to Crailing, had returned to town for the winter season.

The Crailing visit had not been altogether without its embarrassments. It was true that Red Gables was closed and shuttered, so that she had run no risk of meeting either her husband or Adrienne, but Jerry, in the character of an engaged young man, had been staying at the Rectory, and he had allowed Diana to see plainly that his sympathies lay pre-eminently with Max, and that he utterly condemned her lack of faith in her husband.

"Some day, Diana, you'll be sorry that you chucked one of the best chaps in the world," he told her, with a fierce young championship that was rather touching, warring, as it did, with his honest affection for Diana herself. "Oh! It makes me sick! You two ought to have had such a splendid life together."

Rather wistfully, Diana asked the Rector if he, too, blamed her entirely for what had occurred. But Alan Stair's wide charity held no room for censure.

"My dear," he told her, "I don't think I want to *blame* either you or Max. The situation was difficult, and you weren't quite strong enough to cope with it. That's all. But"—with one of his rare smiles that flashed out like sunshine after rain—"you haven't reached the end of the chapter yet."

Diana shook her head.

"I think we have, Pobs. I, for one, shall never reopen

the pages. My musical work is going to fill my life in future."

Stair's eyes twinkled with a quiet humour.

"Sponge cake is filling, my dear, very," he responded. "But it's not satisfying—like bread."

Since Diana had left her husband, fate had so willed it that they had never chanced to meet. She had appeared very little in society, excusing herself on the plea that her professional engagements demanded all her energies. And certainly, since the immediate and overwhelming success which she had achieved at Covent Garden, her operatic work had made immense demands both upon her time and physical strength.

But, with the advent of autumn, the probabilities of a meeting between husband and wife were increased a hundredfold, since Diana's engagements included a considerable number of private receptions in addition to her concert work, and she never sang at a big society crush without an inward apprehension that she might encounter Max amongst the guests.

She shrank from meeting him again as a wounded man shrinks from an accidental touch upon his hurt. It had been easy enough, in the first intolerant passion which had overwhelmed her, to contemplate life apart from him. Indeed, to leave him had seemed the only obvious course to save her from the daily flagellation of her love, the hourly insult to her dignity, that his relations with Adrienne de Gervais and the whole mystery which hung about his actions had engendered.

But when once the cord had been cut, and life in its actuality had to be faced apart from him, Diana found that love, hurt and buffeted though it may be, still remains love, a thing of flame and fire, its very essence a desire for the loved one's presence.

Every fibre of her being cried aloud for Max, and there

were times when the longing for the warm, human touch of his hand, for the sound of his voice, grew almost unbearable. Yet any meeting between them could be but a barren reminder of the past, revitalising the dull ache of longing into a quick and overmastering agony; and, realising this, Diana recoiled from the possibility with a fear almost bordering upon panic.

She achieved a certain feeling of security in the fact that she had made her home with Baroni and his sister. Signora Evanci mothered her and petted her and fussed over her, much as she did over Baroni himself, and the old *maestro*, aware of the tangle of Diana's matrimonial affairs, and ambitious for her artistic future, was likely to do his utmost to avert a meeting between husband and wife—since emotional crises are apt to impair the voice.

From Baroni's point of view, the happenings of life were chiefly of importance in so far as they tended towards the perfecting of the artiste.

"Love is good," he had said on one occasion. "No one can interpret romantic music who has not loved. And a broken heart in the past, and plenty of good food in the present—these may very well make a great artiste. But a heart that *keeps on* breaking, that is not permitted to heal itself—no, that is not good. *A la fin,* the voice breaks also."

Hence he regarded his favourite pupil with considerable anxiety. To his experienced eye it was palpable that the happenings of her married life had tried Diana's strength almost to breaking point, and that the enthusiasm and energy with which, seeking an anodyne to pain, she had flung herself into her work, would act either one way or the other —would either finish the job, so that the frayed nerves gave way, culminating in a serious breakdown of her health, or so fill her horizon that the memories of the past gradually receded into insignificance.

The cup of fame, newly held to her lips, could not but

rove an intoxicating draught. There was a rushing excitement, an exhilaration about her life as a well-known public inger, which acted as a constant stimulus. The enthusiasic acclamations with which she was everywhere received, he adulation that invariably surrounded her, and the inense joy which, as a genuine artist, she derived from the ork itself, all acted as a narcotic to the pain of memory, nd out of these she tried to build up a new life for herself, life in which love should have neither part nor lot, but herein added fame and recognition was to be the ultimate oal.

Her singing had improved; there was a new depth of eling in her interpretation which her own pain and sufring had taught her, and it was no infrequent thing for art of her audience to be moved to tears, wistfully reminded some long-dead romance, when she sang "The Haven of emory"—a song which came to be associated with her ame much in the same way that "Home, Sweet Home" was ssociated with another great singer, whose golden voice ave new meaning to the familiar words.

Olga Lermontof still remained her accompanist. For me unfathomed reason she no longer flung out the bitter bes and thrusts at Errington which had formerly sprung readily to her lips, and Diana grimly ascribed this forarance to an odd kind of delicacy—the generosity of the ctor who refuses to triumph openly over the vanquished!

Once, in a bitter mood, Diana had taxed her with it.

"You must feel satisfied now that you have achieved your ject," she told her.

The Russian, idly improvising on the piano, dropped her nds from the keys, and her eyes held a queer kind of pain them as she made answer.

"And what exactly did you think my object was?" she eried.

"Surely it was obvious?" replied Diana lightly. "When ax and I were together, you never ceased to sow discord

between us—though why you hated him so, I cannot te
—and now that we have separated, I suppose you are co
tent."

"Content?" Olga laughed shortly. "I never wanted yo
to separate. And"—she hesitated—"I never hated Max E
rington."

"I don't believe it!" The assertion leaped involuntaril
from Diana's lips.

"I can understand that." Olga spoke with a curiou
kind of patience. "But, believe it or not as you will, I wa
working for quite other ends. And I've failed," she adde
dispiritedly.

With the opening of the autumn season and the ensuin
rebirth of musical and theatrical life, London received a
unexpected shock. It was announced that Adrienne de Ge
vais was retiring from her position as leading lady at th
Premier Theatre, and for a few days after the launchin
of this thunderbolt the theatre-going world hummed wit
the startling news, while a dozen rumours were set on foo
to account for what must surely prove little less than
disaster to the management of the Premier.

But, as usual, after the first buzz of surprise and excite
ment had spent itself, people settled down, and reluctantl
accepted the official explanation furnished by the news
papers—namely, that the popular actress had suffered co
siderably in health from the strain of several successiv
heavy seasons and intended to winter abroad.

To Diana the news yielded an odd sense of comfor
Somehow the thought of Adrienne's absence from Englan
seemed to bring Max nearer, to make him more her ow
again. Even though they were separated, there was a ce
tain consolation in the knowledge that the woman whos
close friendship with her husband had helped to make shi
wreck of their happiness was going out of his life, thoug
it might be only for a little time.

One day, impelled by an irresistible desire to test th

truth of the newspaper reports, Diana took her way to Somervell Street, pausing opposite the house that had been Adrienne's. She found it invested with a curious air of unfamiliarity, facing the street with blank and shuttered windows, like blind eyes staring back at her unrecognisingly.

So it was true! Adrienne had gone away and the house was empty and closed.

Diana retraced her steps homeward, conscious of a queer feeling of satisfaction. Often the thought that Max and Adrienne might be together had tortured her almost beyond endurance, adding a keener edge to the pain of separation.

Pain! Life seemed made up of pain these days. Sometimes she wondered how much a single human being was capable of bearing.

It was months—an eternity—since she and Max had parted, and still her heart cried out for him, fighting the bitter anger and distrust that had driven her from him.

She felt she could have borne it more easily had he died. Then the remembrance of his love would still have been hers to hold and keep, something most precious and unspoilt. But now, each memory of their life together was tarnished with doubt and suspicion and mistrust. She had put him to the test, bade him choose betwixt her and Adrienne, claiming his confidence as her right—and he had chosen Adrienne and declined to trust her with his secret.

She told herself that had he loved her, he *must* have yielded. No man who cared could have refused her, and the scourge of wounded pride drove her into that outer darkness where bitterness and "proper self-respect" defile the face of Love.

She had turned desperately to her work for distraction from the ceaseless torture of her thoughts, but not all the work in the world had been able to silence the cry of her heart.

For work can do no more than fill the day, and though Diana feverishly crammed each day so full that there was little time to think and remember, the nights remained—the interminable nights, when she was alone with her own soul, and when the memories which the day's work had beaten back came pressing in upon her.

Oh, God! The nights—the endless, intolerable nights! . . .

CHAPTER XXIV

THE VISION OF LOVE

A WEEK after her visit to Somervell Street, the thing which Diana had dreaded came to pass.

She was attending a reception at the French Embassy, and as she made her way through the crowded rooms, followed by Olga Lermontof—who frequently added to the duties of accompanist those of *dame de compagnie* to the great *prima donna*—she came suddenly face to face with Max.

To many of us the anticipation of an unpleasant happening is far more agonising than the actual thing itself. The mind, brooding apprehensively upon what may conceivably occur, exaggerates the possibilities of the situation, enhancing all the disagreeable details, and oblivious of any mitigating circumstances which may, quite probably, accompany it. There is sound sense and infinite comfort, if you look for it, in the old saying which bids us not to cross our bridges till we come to them.

The fear of the unknown, the unexperienced, is a more haunting, insidious fear than any other, and sometimes one positively longs to hasten the advent of an unwelcome ordeal, in order that the worst may be known and the menace of the future be transformed into a memory of the past.

So it was with Diana. She had been for so long beset by her fear of the first meeting that she experienced a sensation almost of relief when her eyes fell at last upon the tall figure of her husband.

He was deep in conversation with the French Ambassador at the moment, but as Diana approached it was as though some sensitive, invisible live wire had vibrated, apprising

him of her nearness, and he looked up suddenly, his blu eyes gazing straight into hers.

To Diana, the brief encounter proved amazingly simpl and easy in contrast with the shrinking apprehensions sh had formed. A slight bow from her, its grave return fro him, and the dreaded moment was past.

It was only afterwards that she realised, with a sense o sick dismay, how terribly he had altered. She caught a the accompanist's arm with nervous force.

"Olga!" she whispered. "Did you see?"

The Russian's expression answered her. Her face wor a curious stunned look, and her mouth twitched as she trie to control the sudden trembling of her lips.

"Come outside—on to this balcony." Olga spoke wit a fierce imperativeness as she saw Diana sway uncertainl and her face whiten.

Once outside in the cool shelter of the balcony, dimly li by swaying Chinese lanterns, Diana sank into a chair, shake and unnerved. For an instant her eyes strayed back t where, through the open French window, she could see Ma still conversing with the Ambassador, but she averted the swiftly.

The change in him hurt her like the sudden stab of knife. His face was worn and lined; there was something ascetic-looking in the hollowed line from cheek-bone to chi and in the stern, austere closing of the lips, while the eye —the mocking blue eyes with the laughter always lurkin at the back of them—held an expression of deep, unalter able sadness.

"Olga!" The word broke from Diana's white lips lik a cry of appeal, tremulous and uncertain.

But Miss Lermontof made no response. She seeme quite unmoved by the distress of the woman sitting huddle in the chair before her, and her light green eyes shone wit a curious savage glint like the eyes of a cat.

Diana spoke again nervously.

"Are you—angry with me?"

"Angry!" The Russian almost spat out the word. "Angry! Don't you see what you're doing?"

"What I'm doing?" repeated Diana. "What am I doing?"

Olga replied with a grim incisiveness.

"You're killing Max—that's all. This—this is going to break him—break him utterly."

There was a long silence, and the dewy dusk of the night, shaken into pearly mist where the flickering light of the Chinese lanterns illumined it, seemed to close round the two women like a filmy curtain, shutting them off from the chattering throng in the adjoining room.

Presently a cart rattled past in the street below, rasping the tense silence.

Diana lifted her head.

"I didn't know!" she said helplessly. "I didn't know! . . ."

"And yet you professed to love him!" Olga spoke consideringly, an element of contemptuous wonder in her voice.

The memory of words that Max had uttered long ago stirred in Diana's mind.

"You don't know what love means!"

Limned against the darkness she could see once more the sun-warmed beach at Culver Point, the blue, sparkling sea with the white gulls wheeling above it, and Max—Max standing tall and straight beside her, with a shaft of sunlight flickering across his hair, and love illimitable in his eyes.

"You don't know what love means!"

The words penetrated to her innermost consciousness, cleaving their way sheer through the fog of doubt and mistrust and pride as the sharp blade of the surgeon's knife cuts deep into a festering wound. And before their clarifying, essential truth, Diana's soul recoiled in dumb dismay.

No, she hadn't known what love meant—love, which, with

an exquisite unreasonableness, believes when there is ground for doubt—hadn't understood it as even this cynical, bitter-tongued Russian understood it. And she recognised the scorn on Olga's white, contemptuous face as the unlovely sheath of an ideal of love immeasurably beyond her own achieving.

The vision of Culver Point faded away, and an impalpable wall of darkness seemed to close about her. Dimly, as though it were some one else's voice speaking, she heard herself say slowly:—

"I thought I loved him." Then, after a pause, "Will you go? Please go. I should like to be . . . quiet . . . a little while."

For a moment Olga gazed down at her, eagerly, almost hungrily, as though silently beseeching her. Then, still silently, she went away.

Diana sat very still. Above her, the gay-coloured Chinese lanterns swayed to and fro in the little breeze that drifted up the street, and above again, far off in the sombre sky, the stars looked down—pitiless, unmoved, as they have looked down through all the ages upon the pigmy joys and sufferings of humanity.

For the first time Diana was awake to the limitations she had set to love.

The meeting with her husband had shaken her to the very foundations of her being, the shock of his changed appearance sweeping away at a single blow the whole fabric of artificial happiness that she had been trying to build up.

She had thought that the wound in her heart would heal, that she could teach herself to forget the past. And lo! At the first sight of his face the old love and longing had reawakened with a strength she was powerless to withstand.

The old love, but changed into something immeasurably more than it had ever been before, and holding in its depths a finer understanding. And with this clearer vision came a sudden new knowledge—a knowledge fraught with pain

and yet bearing deep within it an unutterable sense of joy.

Max had cared all the time—cared still! It was written in the lines of suffering on his face, in the quiet endurance of the close-shut mouth. Despite the bitter, pitiful misunderstandings of their married life, despite his inexplicable friendship for Adrienne, despite all that had gone before, Diana was sure, in the light of this larger understanding which had come to her, that through it all he had loved her. With an absolute certainty of conviction, she knew that it was her hand which had graved those fresh lines about his mouth, brought that look of calm sadness to his eyes, and the realisation held a strange mingling of exquisite joy and keen anguish.

She hid her face in her hands, hid it from the stars and the shrouding dark, tremulously abashed at the wonderful significance of love.

She almost laughed to think how she had allowed so small a thing as the secret which Max could not tell her to corrode and eat into the heart of happiness. Looking back from the standpoint she had now gained, it seemed so pitifully mean and paltry, a profanation of the whole inner, hidden meaning of love.

So long as she and Max cared for each other, nothing else mattered, nothing in the whole world. And the long battle between love and pride—between love, that had turned her days and nights into one endless ache of longing to return to Max, and pride, that had barred the way inflexibly—was over, done with.

Love had won, hands down. She would go back to Max, and all thought that it might be weak-minded of her, humiliating to her self-respect, was swept aside. Love, the great teacher, had brought her through the dark places where the lesser gods hold sway, out into the light of day, and she knew that to return to Max, to give herself afresh to him, would be the veritable triumph of love itself.

She would go back, back to the shelter of his love which

had been waiting for her all the time, unswerving and unreproaching. She had read it in his eyes when they had met her own an hour ago.

"I want you—body and soul I want you!" he had told her there by the cliffs at Culver.

And she had not given him all her soul. She had kept back that supreme belief in the beloved which is an integral part of love. But now, now she would go to him and give with both hands royally—faith and trust, blindly, as love demanded.

She smiled a little. Happiness and the haven of Max's arms seemed very near her just then.

She was very silent as she and Olga Lermontof drove home together from the Embassy, but just at the last, when the limousine stopped at Baroni's house, she leaned closer to Olga in the semi-darkness, and whispered a little breathlessly:—

"I'm going back to him, Olga."

Somehow the mere putting of it into words seemed to give it substance, convert it into an actual fact that could be talked about, just like the weather, or one's favourite play, or any other commonplace matter which can be spoken of because it has a knowledgeable existence. And the Russian's quick "Thank God!" set the seal of assuredness upon it.

"Yes—thank God," answered Diana simply.

The car, which was to take the accompanist on to Brutton Square, slipped away down the lamp-lit street, and Diana fled upstairs to her room.

She must be alone—alone with her thoughts. She no longer dreaded the night and its quiet solitude. It was a solitude pervaded by a deep, abiding peace, the anteroom of happiness.

To-morrow she would go to Max, and tell him that love had taught her belief and faith—all that he had asked of her and that she had so failed to give.

She lay long awake, gazing into the dark, dreamily conscious of utter peace and calm. To-morrow . . . to-morrow. . . . Presently her eyes closed and she slept. Once she stirred and smiled a little in her sleep, while the word "Max" fluttered from between her lips, almost as though it had been a prayer.

CHAPTER XXV

BREAKING-POINT

WHEN Diana woke the following morning it was to a drowsy sense of utter peace and content. She wondered vaguely what had given rise to it. Usually, when she came back to the waking world, it was with a shrinking almost akin to terror that a new day had begun and must be lived through—twelve empty, meaningless hours of it.

As full consciousness returned, the remembrance of yesterday's meeting with Max, and of all that had succeeded it, flashed into her mind like a sudden ray of sunlight, and she realised that what had tinged her thoughts with rose colour was the quiet happiness, bred of her determination to return to her husband, which had lain stored at the back of her brain during the hours of unconsciousness.

She sat up in bed, vividly, joyously awake, just as her maid came in with her breakfast tray.

"Make haste, Milling," she exclaimed, a thrill of eager excitement in her voice. "It's a lovely morning, and there's so much going to happen to-day that I can't waste any time over breakfast."

It was the old, impetuous Diana who spoke, impulsively carried away by the emotion of the moment.

"Is there, madam?" Milling, arranging the breakfast things on a little table beside the bed, regarded her mistress affectionately. It was long, very long, since she had seen her with that look of happy anticipation in her face—never since the good days at Lilac Lodge, before she had quarrelled so irrevocably with her husband—and the maid wondered whether it foretokened a reconciliation. "Is there, madam? Then I'm glad it's a fine day. It's a good omen."

Diana smiled at her.

"Yes," she repeated contentedly. "It's a good omen."

Milling paused on her way out of the room.

"If you please, madam, Signor Baroni would like to know at what time you will be ready to rehearse your songs for to-night, so that he can telephone through to Miss Lermontof."

To rehearse! Diana's face clouded suddenly. She had entirely forgotten that she had promised to give her services that night at a reception, organised in aid of some charity by the Duchess of Linfield—the shrewish old woman who had paid Diana her first tribute of tears—and the recollection of it sounded the knell to her hopes of seeing Max that day. The morning must perforce be devoted to practising, the afternoon to the necessary rest which Baroni insisted upon, and after that there would be only time to dress and partake of a light meal before she drove to the Duchess's house.

It would not be possible to see Max! Even had there been time she dared not risk the probable consequences to her voice which the strain and emotion of such an interview must necessarily carry in their train.

For a moment she felt tempted to break her engagement, to throw it over at the last instant and telephone to the Duchess to find a substitute. And then her sense of duty to her public—to the big, warm-hearted public who had always welcomed and supported her—pushed itself to the fore, forbidding her to take this way out of the difficulty.

How could she, who had never yet broken a contract when her appearance involved a big fee, fail now, on an occasion when she had consented to *give* her services, and when it was her name alone on the programme which had charmed so much money from the pockets of the wealthy, that not a single seat of all that could be crowded into the Duchess's rooms remained unsold? Oh, it was impossible!

Had it meant the renouncing of the biggest fee ever offered her, Diana would have impetuously sacrificed it and

flung her patrons overboard. But it meant something more than that. It was a debt of honour, her professional honour.

After all, the fulfilment of her promise to sing would only mean setting her own affairs aside for twenty-four hours, and somehow she felt that Max would understand and approve. He would never wish to snatch a few earlier hours of happiness if they must needs be purchased at the price of a broken promise. But her heart sank as she faced the only alternative.

She turned to Milling, the happy exultation that had lit her eyes suddenly quenched.

"Ask the *Maestro* kindly to 'phone Miss Lermontof that I shall be ready at eleven," she said quietly.

In some curious way this unlooked-for upset to her plans seemed to have cast a shadow across her path. The warm surety of coming happiness which had lapped her round receded, and a vague, indefinable apprehension invaded her consciousness. It was as though she sensed something sinister that lay in wait for her round the next corner, and all her efforts to recapture the radiant exultation of her mood of yestereve, to shake off the nervous dread that had laid hold of her, failed miserably.

Her breakfast was standing untouched on the table beside her bed. She regarded it distastefully. Then, recalling with a wry smile Baroni's dictum that "good food, and plenty of good food, means voice," she reluctantly began to eat, idly turning over the while the pages of one of the newspapers which Milling had placed beside the breakfast tray. It was an illustrated weekly, and numbered amongst its staff an enterprising young journalist, possessed of an absolute genius for nosing out such matters as the principal people concerned in them particularly desired kept secret. These the enterprising young journalist's paper served up piping-hot in their *Tattle of the Town* column—a column denounced by the pilloried few and devoured with eager interest by the rest of the world.

Diana, sipping her coffee, turned to it half-heartedly, hop-

ing to find some odd bit of news that might serve to distract her thoughts.

There were the usual sly hits at several well-known society women whose public charities covered a multitude of private sins, followed by a very inadequately veiled reference to the chief actors in a recent divorce case, and then—

Diana's eyes glued themselves to the printed page before her. Very deliberately she set down her cup on the tray beside her, and taking up the paper again, re-read the paragraph which had so suddenly riveted her attention. It ran as follows:—

"Is it true that the *nom de plume* of a dramatist, well-known in London circles, masks the identity of the son of a certain romantic royal duke who contracted a morganatic marriage with one of the most beautiful Englishwomen of the seventies?

"It would be curious if there proved to be a connecting link between this whisper and the recent disappearance from the stage of the popular actress who has been so closely associated with the plays emanating from the gifted pen of that same dramatist.

"Interested readers should carefully watch forthcoming events in the little state of Ruvania."

Diana stared at the newspaper incredulously, and a half-stifled exclamation broke from her.

There was—there *could* be—no possible doubt to whom the paragraph bore reference. *"A well-known dramatist and the popular actress so closely associated with his works"* —why, to any one with the most superficial knowledge of plays and players of the moment, it was as obvious as though the names had been written in capitals.

Max and Adrienne! Their identities linked together and woven into a fresh tissue of mystery and innuendo!

Diana smiled a little at the suggestion that Max might be the son of a royal duke. It was so very far-fetched—fantastic in the extreme.

And then, all at once, she remembered Olga's significant query of long ago: *"Have you ever asked him who he is?"* and Max's stern refusal to answer the question when she had put it to him.

At the time it had only given an additional twist to the threads of the intolerable web of mystery which had enmeshed her married life. But now it suddenly blazed out like a beacon illumining the dark places. Supposing it were true—supposing Max *had* been masquerading under another name all the time—then this suggestive little paragraph contained a clue from which she might perhaps unravel the whole hateful mystery.

Her brows drew together as she puzzled over the matter. This history of a morganatic marriage—it held a faint ring of familiarity. Vaguely she recollected having heard the story of some royal duke who had married an Englishwoman many years ago.

For a few minutes she racked her brain, unable to place the incident. Then, her eyes falling absently upon the newspaper once more, the last word of the paragraph suddenly unlocked the rusty door of memory.

Ruvania! She remembered the story now! There had once been a younger brother and heir of a reigning grand-duke of Ruvania who had fallen so headlong in love with a beautiful Englishwoman that he had renounced his royal state and his claims to the grand ducal throne, and had married the lady of his choice, thereafter living the life of a simple country gentleman.

The affair had taken place a good many years prior to Diana's entry into life, but at the time it had made such a romantic appeal to the sentimental heart of the world at large that it had never been quite forgotten, and had been retold in Diana's hearing on more than one occasion.

Indeed, she recollected having once seen a newspaper containing an early portrait of a family group composed of Duke Boris and his morganatic wife and children. There had been two of the latter, a boy and a girl, and Diana

suddenly realised, with an irrepressible little flutter of tender excitement, that if the fantastic story hinted at in *Tattle of the Town* were true, then the boy whom, years ago, she had seen pictured in the photograph must have been actually Max himself.

And—again if it were true—how naturally and easily it explained that little unconscious air of hauteur and authority that she had so often observed in him—the "lordly" air upon which she had laughingly remarked to Pobs, when describing the man who had been her companion on that memorable railway journey, when death had drawn very near them both and then had passed them by.

Her thoughts raced onward, envisaging the possibilities involved.

There were no dukes of Ruvania now; that she knew. The little State, close on the borders of Russia, had been—like so many of the smaller Eastern States—convulsed by a revolution some ten years ago, and since then had been governed by a republic.

Was the explanation of all that had so mystified her to be found in the fact that Max was a political exile?

The *Tattle of the Town* paragraph practically suggested that the affairs of the "well-known dramatist" were in some way bound up with the destiny of Ruvania. That was indicated plainly enough in the reference to "forthcoming events."

Diana's head whirled with the throng of confused ideas that poured in upon her.

And Adrienne de Gervais? What part did she play in this strange medley? *Tattle of the Town* assigned her one. Max and Adrienne and Ruvania were all inextricably tangled up together in the thought-provoking paragraph.

Suddenly, Diana's heart gave a great leap as a possible explanation of the whole matter sprang into her mind. There had been two children of the morganatic marriage, a son and a daughter. Was it conceivable that Adrienne de Gervais was the daughter?

Adrienne, Max's sister! That would account for his inexplicably close friendship with her, his devotion to her welfare, and—if she, like himself, were exiled—the secrecy which he had maintained.

Slowly the conviction that this was the true explanation of all that had caused her such bitter heartburning in the unhappy past grew and deepened in Diana's mind. A chill feeling of dismay crept about her heart. If it were true, then how hideously—how *unforgivably*—she had misjudged her husband!

She drew a sharp, agonised breath, her shaking fingers gripping the bedclothes like a frightened child's.

"Oh, not that! Don't let it be that!" she whispered piteously.

She looked round the room with scared eyes. Who could help her—tell her the truth—set at rest this new fear which had assailed her? There must be some one . . . some one. . . . Yes, there was Olga! *She* knew—had known Max's secret all along. But would she speak? Would she reveal the truth? Something—heaven knew what!—had kept her silent hitherto, save for the utterance of those maddening taunts and innuendoes which had so often lodged in Diana's heart and festered there.

Feverishly Diana sprang out of bed and began to dress, flinging on her clothes in a very frenzy of haste. She would see Olga, and beg, pray, beseech her, if necessary, to tell her all she knew.

If she failed, if the Russian woman obstinately denied her, she would know no peace of mind—no rest. She felt she had reached breaking-point—she could endure no more.

But she would not fail. When Olga came—and she would be here soon, very soon now—she would play up the knowledge she had gleaned from the newspaper for all it was worth, and she would force the truth from her, willing or unwilling.

Whether that truth spelt heaven, or the utter, final wrecking of all her life, she must know it.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE REAPING

HALF an hour later Diana descended to the big music-room, where she usually rehearsed, to find Olga Lermontof already awaiting her there.

By a sheer effort of will she had fought down the storm of emotion which had threatened to overwhelm her, and now, as she greeted her accompanist, she was quite cool and composed, though rather pale and with tired shadows beneath her eyes.

There was something almost unnatural in her calm, and the shrewd Russian eyed her with a sudden apprehension. This was not the same woman whom she had left last night, thrilling and softly tremulous with love.

She began speaking quickly, an undercurrent of suppressed excitement in her tones.

"There's some mistake, isn't there? You don't want me —this morning?"

Diana regarded her composedly.

"Certainly I want you—to rehearse for to-night."

"To rehearse? Rehearse?" Olga's voice rose in a sharp crescendo of amazement. "Surely"—bending forward to peer into Diana's face—"surely you are not going to keep Max waiting while you—*rehearse?*"

"It's impossible for us to meet to-day," replied Diana steadily. "I had—forgotten—the Duchess's reception."

Olga made a gesture of impatience.

"But you must meet to-day," she said imperiously. "You *must!* To-morrow it will be too late."

"Too late? How too late?"

Miss Lermontof hesitated a moment. Then she said quietly:—

"I happen to know that Max is leaving England to-night."

Diana shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, he will come back, I suppose."

The other looked at her curiously.

"Diana, what has come to you? You are so—changed—since last night."

"We're told that 'night unto night showeth knowledge,'" retorted Diana bitterly. "Perhaps *my* knowledge has increased since—last night." She watched the puzzled expression deepen on Olga's face. Then she added: "So I can afford to wait a little longer to see Max."

Again Miss Lermontof hesitated. Then, as though impelled to speak despite her better judgment, she burst out impetuously:—

"But you can't! You can't wait. He isn't coming back again."

There was a queer tense note in Diana's voice as she played her first big card.

"Then I suppose I shall have to follow him to—Ruvania," she said very quietly.

"To Ruvania?" Olga repeated, and by the sudden narrowing of her eyes, as though she were all at once "on guard," Diana knew that her shot in the dark had gone home. "What do you mean? Why—Ruvania?"

Diana faced her squarely. Despite her feverish desire to wring the truth from the other woman, she had herself well in hand, and when she spoke it was with a certain dignity.

"Don't you think that the time for pretence and hypocrisy has gone by? *You* know—all that I ought to know. Now that even the newspapers are aware of Max's—and Adrienne's—connection with Ruvania, do you still think it necessary that I, his wife, should be kept in the dark?"

"The newspapers?" Olga spoke with sudden excitement.

"How much do they know? What do they say? . . . After all, though," she added more quietly, "it doesn't much matter—now. Everything is settled—for good or ill. But if the papers had got hold of it sooner——"

"Well?" queried Diana coolly, intent on driving her into giving up her knowledge. "What if they had?"

Olga surveyed her ironically.

"What if they had? Only that, if they had, probably you wouldn't have possessed a husband a few hours later. A knife in the back is a quick road out of life, you know."

Diana caught her breath, and her self-command gave way suddenly.

"For God's sake, what do you mean? Tell me—you must tell me—everything, everything! I can't bear it any longer. I know too much——" She broke off with a dry, choking sob.

Olga's face softened.

"You poor child!" she muttered to herself. Then, aloud, she said gently: "Tell me—how much do you know?"

With an effort Diana mastered herself again.

"I know Max's parentage," she began steadily.

"You know that?"—with quick surprise.

"Yes. And that he has a sister."

Olga nodded, smiling rather oddly.

"Yes. He has a sister," she admitted.

"And that he is involved in Ruvanian politics. Something is going to happen there, in Ruvania——"

"Yes to that also. Something is going to happen there. The republic is down and out, and the last of the Mazaroffs is going to receive back the ducal crown." There was a tinge of mockery in Miss Lermontof's curt tones.

Diana gave a cry of dismay.

"Not—not Max?" she stammered. All at once, he seemed to have receded very far away from her, to have been snatched into a world whither she would never be able to follow him.

"Max?" Olga's face darkened. "No—not Max, but Nadine Mazaroff."

"Nadine Mazaroff?" repeated Diana uncomprehendingly. "Who is Nadine Mazaroff?"

"She is the woman you knew as Adrienne de Gervais."

"Adrienne? Is that her name—Nadine Mazaroff? Then—then"—Diana's breath came unevenly—"she's not Max's sister?"

"No"—shortly. "She is—or will be within a week—the Grand Duchess of Ruvania."

"Go on," urged Diana, as the other paused. "Go on. Tell me everything. I know so much already that it can't be breaking faith with any one for you to tell me the whole truth now."

Olga looked at her consideringly.

"No. I suppose, since the journalists have ferreted it out, it won't be a secret much longer," she conceded grimly. "And, in any case, it doesn't matter now. It's all settled." She sighed. "Besides"—with a faint smile—"if I tell you, it will save Max a long story when you meet."

"Yes," replied Diana, an odd expression flitting across her face. "It will save Max a long story—when we meet. Tell me," she continued, with an effort, "tell me about—Nadine Mazaroff."

"Nadine?" cried Olga, with sudden violence. "Nadine Mazaroff is the woman I hate more than any other on this earth!" Her eyes gleamed malevolently. "She stands where Max should stand. If it were not for her the Ruvanian people would have accepted him as their ruler—and overlooked his English mother. But Nadine is the legitimate heir, the child of the late Grand Duke—and Max is thrust out of the succession because our father's marriage was a morganatic one."

"*Your* father?"

"Yes"—with a brief smile—"I am the sister whose existence you discovered."

For a moment Diana was silent. It had never occurred to her to connect Max and Olga in any way; the latter had always seemed to her to be more or less at open enmity with him.

Immediately her heart contracted with the old haunting fear. What, then, was Adrienne to Max?

"Go on," she whispered at last, under her breath. "Go on."

"I've never forgiven my father"—Olga spoke with increasing passion. "For his happiness with his English wife, Max and I have paid every day of our lives! . . . As soon as I was of age, I refused the State allowance granted me as a daughter of Boris Mazaroff, and left the Ruvanian Court. Since then I've lived in England as plain Miss Lermontof, and earned my own living. Not one penny of their tainted money will I touch!"—fiercely.

"But Max—Max!" broke in Diana. "Tell me about Max!" Olga's personal quarrel with her country held no interest for a woman on the rack.

"Max?" Olga shrugged her shoulders. "Max is either a saint or a fool—God knows which! For his loyalty to the House that branded him with a stigma, and to the woman who robbed him of his heritage, has never failed."

"You mean—Adrienne?" whispered Diana, as Olga paused an instant, shaken by emotion.

"Yes, I mean Adrienne—Nadine Mazaroff. Her parents were killed in the Ruvanian revolution—butchered by the mob on the very steps of the palace. But she herself was saved by my brother. At the time the revolt broke out, he was living in Borovnitz, the capital, and he rushed off to the palace and contrived to rescue Nadine and get her away to England. Since then, while the Royalist party have been working day and night for the restoration of the Mazaroffs, Max has watched over her safety." She paused, resuming with an accent of jealous resentment: "And it has been no easy task. German money backed the revolution, in the

hope that when Ruvania grew tired of her penny-farthing republic—as she was bound to do—Germany might step in again and convert Ruvania into a little dependent State under Prussia. There's always a German princeling handy for any vacant throne!"—contemptuously—"and in the event of a big European War, Ruvania in German hands would provide an easy entrance into Russia. So you see, Nadine, alive and in safety, was a perpetual menace to the German plans. For some years she was hidden in a convent down in the West Country, not very far from Crailing, and after a while people came to believe that she, too, had perished in the revolution. It was only then that Max allowed her to emerge from the convent, and by that time she had grown from a young, unformed girl into a woman, so that there was little danger of her being recognised by any casual observer—or even by the agents of the anti-royalist party."

"Max seems to have done—a great deal—for her," said Diana, speaking slowly and rather painfully.

Olga flashed her a brief look of understanding.

"Yes," she said quietly. "He has done everything that patriotism demanded of him—even"—meaningly—"to the sacrificing of his own personal happiness. . . . It was entirely his idea that Nadine should pass as an actress. She always had dramatic talent, and when she came out of the convent he arranged that she should study for the stage. He believed that there was no safer way of concealing her identity than by providing her with an entirely different one—and a very obvious one at that. And events have proved him right. After all, people only become suspicious when they see signs of secrecy, and there is no one more constantly in the public eye than an actress. The last place you would look for a missing grand duchess is on the English stage! The very daring and publicity of the thing made it a success. No one guessed who she was, and only I, I and Carlo Baroni, knew. Oh, yes, I was sworn to secrecy"—as she read the question in Diana's eye—"and when

I saw you and Max drifting apart, and knew that a word from me could set things right, I've been tempted again and again to break my oath. Thank God!"—passionately—"Oh, thank God! I can speak now!"

She twisted her shoulders as though freed from some heavy burden.

"You thank God? *You?*" Diana spoke with bitter unbelief. "Why, it was you who made things a thousand times worse between us—you who goaded me into fresh suspicions. You never helped me to believe in him—although you knew the truth! You tried to part us!"

"I know. I did try," acknowledged Olga frankly. "I'd borne it all for years—watched my brother sheltering Nadine, working for her, using his genius to write plays for her—spilling all his happiness at her feet—and I couldn't endure it any longer. I thought—oh! I *prayed* that when it came to a choice between you and Nadine he would give way—let Nadine fend for herself. And that was why I tried to anger you against him—to drive you into forcing his hand." She paused, her breast heaving tumultuously. "But the plan failed. Max remained staunch, and only his happiness came crashing down about his ears instead. There is"—bleakly—"no saving saints and martyrs against their will."

A silence fell between them, and Diana made a few wavering steps towards a chair and sat down. She felt as though her legs would no longer support her.

In a mad moment, half-crazed by the new fear which the newspaper paragraph had inspired in her, she had closed the only road which might have led her back to Max. Yesterday, still unwitting of how infinitely she had wronged him, passionately, humbly ready to give him the trust he had demanded, she might have gone to him. But to-day, her knowledge of the truth had taken from her the power to make atonement, and had raised a barrier between herself and Max which nothing in the world could ever break down.

She had failed her man in the hour of his need, and henceforth she must walk outcast in desert places.

There were still many gaps in the story to be filled in. But one thing stood out clearly from amidst the chaos which enveloped her, and that was, that she had misjudged her husband—terribly, unforgivably misjudged him.

It was loyalty, not love, that he had given Adrienne, and he had been right—a thousand times right—in refusing to reveal, even to his wife, the secret which was not his alone, and upon which hung issues of life and death and the ultimate destiny of a country—perhaps, even, of Europe itself!

It was to save his country from the Prussian claw that Max had sacrificed himself with the pure fervour of a patriot, at no matter what cost! And she, Diana, by her lack of faith, her petty jealousy, had sent him from her, had seen to it that that cost included even his happiness!

She had failed him every way—trailing the glory of love's golden raiment in the dust of the highway.

If she had but fulfilled her womanhood, what might not her unshaken faith have meant to a man fighting a battle against such bitter odds? No matter how worn with the stress of incessant watchfulness, or wearied by the strain of constant planning and the need to forestall each move of the enemy, he would have found, always waiting for him, a refuge, a quiet haven where love dwelt and where he might forget for a space and be at rest. All this, which had been hers to give, she had withheld.

The silence deepened in the room. The brilliant sunshine, slanting in through the slats of the Venetian blinds, seemed out of place in what had suddenly become a temple of pain. Somewhere outside a robin chirruped, the cheery little sound holding, for one of the two women sitting there, a note of bitter mockery.

Suddenly Diana dropped her head on her hands with a shudder.

"Oh, God!" she whispered. "Oh, God!"

Olga leaned forward and laid a hand on her knee.

"You can go back to him now, and give him all the happiness that he has missed," she said steadily.

"Go back to him?" Diana lifted her head and stared at her with dull eyes. "Oh, no. I shan't do that."

"You won't go back?" Olga spoke slowly, as though she doubted her own hearing.

A faint, derisive smile flickered across Diana's lips.

"How could I? Do you suppose that—that having failed him when he asked me to believe in him, I could go back to him now—now that I know everything? . . . Oh, no, I couldn't do that. I've nothing to offer him—now—nothing to give—neither faith nor trust, because I know the whole truth." She spoke with the quiet finality of one who can see no hope, no possibility of better things, anywhere. The words "Too late!" beat in her brain like the pendulum of a clock, maddeningly insistent.

"If only I had been content to go to him without knowing!" she went on tonelessly. "But that paragraph in the paper—it frightened me. I felt that I *must know* if—if I had been wronging him all the time. And I had!" she ended wearily. "I had." Then, after a moment: "So you see, I can't go back to him."

"You—can't—go—back?" The words fell slowly, one by one, from Olga's lips. "Do you mean that you won't go back now—now that you know he has never failed you as you thought he had? . . . Oh!"—rapidly—"you can't mean that. You won't—you can't refuse to go back now."

Diana lifted a grey, drawn face.

"Don't you see," she said monotonously, "it's just because of that—because he hasn't failed me while I've failed him so utterly—that I can't go back?"

Olga turned on her swiftly, her green eyes blazing dangerously.

"It's your pride!" she cried fiercely. "It's your damnable pride that's standing in the way! Merciful heavens! Did

you ever love him, I wonder, that you're too proud to ask his forgiveness now—now when you know what you've done?"

Diana's lips moved in a pitiful attempt at a smile.

"Oh, no," she said, shaking her head. "It's not that. I've . . . no pride . . . left, I think. But I can't be mean —*mean* enough to crawl back now." She paused, then went on with an inflection of irony in her low, broken voice. "'Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.' . . . Well, I'm reaping—that's all."

Like the keen thrust of a knife came Olga's answer.

"And must he, too, reap your sowing? For that's what it amounts to—that Max must suffer for your sin. Oh! He's paid enough for others! . . . Diana"—imploringly—"Max is leaving England to-night. Go back to him now—don't wait until it's too late."

"No." Diana spoke in dead, flat tones. "Can't you understand?"—moving her head restlessly. "Do you suppose —even if he forgave me—that he could ever believe in me again? He would never be certain that I really trusted him. He would always feel unsure of me."

"If you can think that, then you haven't understood Max —or his love for you," retorted Olga vehemently. "Oh! How can I make you see it? You keep on balancing this against that—what you can give, what Max can believe—weighing out love as though it were sold by the ounce! Max loves you—*loves you!* And there *aren't* any limitations to love!" She broke off abruptly, her voice shaking. "Can't you believe it?" she added helplessly, after a minute.

Diana shook her head.

"I think you mean to be kind," she said patiently. "But love is a giving. And I—have nothing to give."

"And you're too proud to take."

"Yes . . . if you call that pride. I can't take—when I've nothing to give."

"Then you don't love! You don't know what it means to love! Diana"—Olga's voice rose in passionate entreaty—

"for God's sake go to him! He's suffered so much. Forget what people may think—what even he may think! Throw your pride overboard and remember only that he loves you and has need of you. *Go to him!*"

She ceased, and her eyes implored Diana's. No matter what may have been her shortcomings—and they were many, for she was a hard, embittered woman—at least, in her devotion to her brother, Olga Lermontof approached very nearly to the heroic.

There was a long silence. At last Diana spoke in low, shaken tones, her head bowed.

"I can't!" she whispered. "I shall never forgive myself. And I can't ask Max to—forgive me. . . . He couldn't. The last words were hardly audible.

For a moment Olga stood quite still, gazing with hard eyes at the slight figure hunched into drooping lines of utter weariness. Once her lips moved, but no sound came. Then she turned away, walking with lagging footsteps, and a minute later the door opened and closed quietly again behind her.

CHAPTER XXVII

CARLO BARONI EXPLAINS

DIANA sat on, very still, very silent, staring straight in front of her with wide, tearless eyes. Only now and again a long, shuddering sigh escaped her, like the caught breath of a child that has cried till it is utterly exhausted and can cry no more.

She felt that she had come to an end of things. Nothing could undo the past, and ahead of her stretched the future, empty and void of promise.

Presently the creak of the door reopening roused her, and she turned, instantly on the defensive, anticipating that Olga had come back to renew the struggle. But it was only Baroni, who approached her with a look of infinite concern on his kind old face.

"My child!" he began. "My child! . . . So, then! You know all that there is to know."

Diana looked up wearily.

"Yes," she replied. "I know it all."

The old *maestro's* eyes softened as they rested upon her, and when he spoke again, his queer husky voice was toned to a note of extraordinary sweetness.

"My dear pupil, if it had been possible, I would haf spared you this knowledge. It was wrong of Olga to tell you—above all"—his face creasing with anxiety as the ruling passion asserted itself irrepressibly—"to tell you on a day when you haf to sing!"

"I made her," answered Diana listlessly. She passed her hand wearily across her forehead. "Don't worry, *Maestro,* I shall be able to sing to-night."

"*Tiens!* But you are all to pieces, my child! You will drink a glass of champagne—now, at once," he insisted, adding persuasively as she shook her head, "To please me, is it not so?"

Diana's lips curved in a tired smile.

"Is champagne the cure for a heartache, then, *Maestro?*"

Baroni's eyes grew suddenly sad.

"Ah, my dear, only death—or a great love—can heal the wound that lies in the heart," he answered gently. He paused, then resumed crisply: "But, meanwhile, we haf to live—and *prima donnas* haf to sing. So . . . the little glass of wine in my room, is it not?"

He tucked her arm within his, patting her hand paternally, and led her into his own sanctum, where he settled her comfortably in a big easy-chair beside the fire, and poured her out a glass of wine, watching her sip it with a glow of satisfaction in his eyes.

"That goes better, *hein?* This Olga—she had not reflected sufficiently. It was too late for the truth to do good; it could only pain and grieve you."

"Yes," said Diana. "It is too late now. . . . I've paid for my ignorance with my happiness—and Max's," she added in a lower tone. She looked across at Baroni with sudden resentment. "And you—*you knew!*" she continued. "Why didn't you tell me? . . . Oh, but I can guess!"—scornfully. "It suited your purpose for me to quarrel with my husband; it brought me back to the concert platform. My happiness counted for nothing—against that!"

Baroni regarded her patiently.

"And do you regret it? Would you be willing, now, to give up your career as a *prima donna*—and all that it means?"

A vision rose up before Diana of what life would be denuded of the glamour and excitement, the perpetual triumphs, the thrilling sense of power her singing gave her

—the dull, flat monotony of it, and she caught her breath sharply in instinctive recoil.

"No," she admitted slowly. "I couldn't give it up—now."

An odd look of satisfaction overspread Baroni's face.

"Then do not blame me, my child. For haf I not given you a consolation for the troubles of life?"

"I need never have had those troubles to bear if you had been frank with me!" she flashed back. *"You—you* were not bound by any oath of secrecy. Oh! It was cruel of you, *Maestro!"*

Her eyes, bitterly accusing, searched his face.

"Tchut! Tchut! But you are too quick to think evil of your old *maestro."* He hesitated, then went on slowly: "It is a long story, my dear—and sometimes a very sad story. I did not think it would pass my lips again in this world. But for you, who are so dear to me, I will break the silence of years. . . . Listen, then. When you, my little Pepper-pot, had not yet come to earth to torment your parents, but were still just a tiny thought in the corner of God's mind, I—your old Baroni—I was in Ruvania."

"You—in Ruvania?"

He nodded.

"Yes. I went there first as a professor of singing at the Borovnitz Conservatoire—*per Bacco!* But they haf the very soul of music, those Ruvanians! And I was appointed to attend also at the palace to give lessons to the Grand Duchess. Her voice was only a little less beautiful than your own." He hesitated, as though he found it difficult to continue. At last he said almost shyly: "Thou, my child, thou hast known love. . . . To me, too, at the palace, came that best gift of the good God."

He paused, and Diana whispered stammeringly:

"Not—not the Grand Duchess?"

"Yes—Sonia." The old *maestro's* eyes kindled with a soft luminance as his whispering voice caressed the little

name. "Hers, of course, had been merely a marriage dictated by reasons of State, and from the time of our first meeting, our hearts were in each other's keeping. But she never failed in duty or in loyalty. Only once, when I was leaving Ruvania, never to return, did she give me her lips at parting." Again he fell silent, his thoughts straying back across the years between to that day when he had taken farewell of the woman who had held his very soul between her hands. Presently, with an effort, he resumed his story. "I stayed at the Ruvanian Court many years—there was a post of Court musician which I filled—and for both of us those years held much of sadness. The Grand Duke Anton was a domineering man, hated by every one; and his wife's happiness counted for nothing with him. She had failed to give him a son, and for that he never pardoned her. I think my presence comforted her a little. That—and the child—the little Nadine. . . . As much as Anton was disliked, so much was his brother Boris beloved of the people. His story you know. Of this I am sure—that he lived and died without once regretting the step he had taken in marrying an Englishwoman. They were lovers to the end, those two."

Listening to the little history of those two tender love tales that had run their course side by side, Diana almost forgot for a moment how the ripples of their influence, flowing out in ever-widening circles, had touched, at last, even her own life, and had engulfed her happiness.

But, as Baroni ceased, the recollection of her own bitter share in the matter returned with overwhelming force, and once more she arraigned him for his silence.

"I still see no reason why you should not have told me the truth about Adrienne—about Nadine Mazaroff. Max couldn't—I see that; nor Olga. But *you* were bound by no oath."

"My child, I was bound by something stronger than an oath."

The old man crossed the room to where there stood on a shelf a little ebony cabinet, clamped with dull silver of foreign workmanship. He unlocked it, and withdrew from it a letter, the paper faintly yellowed and brittle with the passage of time.

He held it out to Diana.

"No eyes but mine haf ever rested on it since it was given into my hand after her death," he said very gently. "But you, my child, you shall read it; you are hurt and unhappy, battering against fate, and believing that those who love you haf served you ill. But we were all bound in different ways. . . . Read the letter, little one, and thou wilt see that I, too, was not free."

Hesitatingly Diana unfolded the thin sheet and read the few faded lines it contained.

"Carlo mio,

"I think the end is coming for Anton and for me. The revolt of the people is beyond all quelling. My only fear is for Nadine; my only hope for her ultimate safety lies in Max. If ever, in the time to come, your silence or your speech can do aught for my child—in the name of the love you gave me, I beg it of you. In serving her, you will be serving me.

"Sonia."

Very slowly Diana handed the letter back to Baroni.

"So—that was why," she whispered.

Baroni bent his head.

"That was why. I could not speak. But I did all that lay in my power to prevent this marriage of yours."

"You did." A wan little smile tilted the corners of her mouth at the remembrance.

"Afterwards—your happiness was on the knees of the gods!"

"No," said Diana suddenly. "No. It was in my own

hands. Had I believed in Max we should have been happy still. . . . But I failed him."

A long silence followed. At last she rose, holding out her hands.

"Thank you," she said simply. "Thank you for showing me the letter."

Baroni stooped his head and carried her hands to his lips.

"My dear, we make our mistakes and then we pay. It is always so in life. Love"—and the odd, clouded voice shook a little—"Love brings—great happiness—and great pain. Yet we would not be without it."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE AWAKENING

SOMEHOW the interminable hours of the day had at last worn to evening, and Diana found herself standing in front of a big mirror, listlessly watching Milling as she bustled round her, putting the last touches to her dress for the Duchess of Linfield's reception. The same thing had to be gone through every concert night—the same patient waiting while the exquisite toilette, appropriate to a *prima donna,* was consummated by Milling's clever fingers.

Only, this evening, every nerve in Diana's body was quivering in rebellion.

What was it Olga had said? *"Max is leaving England to-night."* So, while she was being dressed like a doll for the pleasuring of the people who had paid to hear her sing, Max was being borne away out of her ken, out of her existence for ever.

What a farce it all seemed! In a little while she would be singing as perfectly as usual, bowing and smiling as usual, and not one amongst the crowded audience would know that in reality it was only the husk of a woman who stood there before them—the mere outer shell. All that mattered, the heart and soul of her, was dead. She knew that quite well. Probably she would feel glad about it in time, she thought, because when one was dead things didn't hurt any more. It was dying that hurt. . . .

"Your train, madam."

She started at the sound of Milling's respectful voice. What a lop-sided thing a civilised sense of values seemed to be! Even when you had dragged the white robes of your

spirit deep in the mire, you must still be scrupulously careful not to soil the hem of the white satin that clothed your body.

She almost laughed aloud, then bit the laugh back, picturing Milling's astonished face. The girl would think she was mad. Perhaps she was. It didn't matter much, anyway.

Mechanically she held out her arm for Milling to throw the train of her gown across it, and, picking up her gloves, went slowly downstairs.

Baroni, his face wearing an expression of acute anxiety, was waiting for her in the hall, restlessly pacing to and fro.

"Ah—h!" His face cleared as by magic when the slender, white-clad figure appeared round the last bend of the stairway. He had half feared that at the last moment the strain of the day's emotion might exact its penalty, and Diana prove unequal to the evening's demands.

To hide his obvious relief, he turned sharply to the maid, who had followed her mistress downstairs, carrying her opera coat and furs.

"Madame's cloak—make haste!" he commanded curtly. And when Diana had entered the car, he waved aside the manservant and himself tucked the big fur rug carefully round her. There was something rather pathetic, almost maternal, in the old man's care of her, and Diana's lips quivered.

"Thank you, dear *Maestro,*" she said, gently pressing his arm with her hand.

The Duchess's house was packed with a complacent crowd of people, congratulating themselves upon being able, for once, to combine duty and pleasure, since the purchase-money of their tickets for the evening's entertainment contributed to a well-known charity, and at the same time procured them the privilege of hearing once more their favourite singer. Some there were who had grounds for additional

satisfaction in the fact that, under the wide cloak of charity, they had managed to squeeze through the exclusive portals of Linfield House for the first—and probably the last—time in their lives.

As the singer made her way through the thronged hall, those who knew her personally bowed and smiled effusively, whilst those who didn't looked on from afar and wished they did. It was not unlike a royal progress, and Diana heaved a quick sigh of relief when at last she found herself in the quiet of the little apartment set aside as an artistes' room.

Olga Lermontof was already there, and Diana greeted her rather nervously. She felt horribly uncertain what attitude Miss Lermontof might be expected to adopt in the circumstances.

But she need have had no anxiety on that score. Olga seemed to be just her usual self—grave and self-contained, her thin, dark-browed face wearing its habitual half-mocking expression. Apparently she had wiped out the day's happenings from her mind, and had become once more merely the quiet, competent accompanist to a well-known singer.

There was no one else in the artistes' room. The other performers were mingling with the guests, only withdrawing from the chattering crowd when claimed by their part in the evening's entertainment.

"How far on are they?" asked Diana, picking up the programme and running her eye down it.

"Your songs are the next item but one," replied Miss Lermontof.

A violin solo preceded the two songs which, bracketed together in the middle of the programme as its culminating point, made the sum total of Diana's part in it, and she waited quietly in the little anteroom while the violinist played, was encored and played again, and throughout the brief interval that followed. She felt that to-night she could not face the cheap, everyday flow of talk and compli-

ment. She would sing because she had promised that she would, but as soon as her part was done she would slip away and go home—home, where she could sit alone by the dead embers of her happiness.

A little flutter of excitement rippled through the big rooms when at last she mounted the platform. People who had hitherto been content to remain in the hall, regarding the music as a pleasant accompaniment to the interchange of the day's news and gossip, now came flocking in through the doorways, hoping to find seats, and mostly having to content themselves with standing-room.

Almost as in a dream Diana waited for the applause to subside, her eyes roaming half-unconsciously over the big assembly.

It was all so stalely familiar—the little rustle of excitement, the preliminary clapping, the settling down to listen, and then the sea of upturned faces spread out beneath her.

The memory of the first time that she had sung in public, at Adrienne's house in Somervell Street, came back to her. It had been just such an occasion as this. . . .

(Olga was playing the introductory bars of accompaniment to her song, and, still as in a dream, she began to sing, the exquisite voice thrilling out into the vast room, golden and perfect.)

. . . Adrienne had smiled at her encouragingly from across the room, and Jerry Leigh had been standing at the far end near some big double doors. There were double doors to this room, too, flung wide open. (It was odd how clearly she could recall it all; her mind seemed to be working quite independently of what was going on around her.) And Max had been there. She remembered how she had believed him to be still abroad, and then, how she had looked up and suddenly met his gaze across those rows and rows of unfamiliar faces. He had come back.

Instinctively she glanced towards the far end of the room, where, on that other night and in that other room, he had

been standing, and then . . . then . . . was it still only the dream, the memory of long ago? . . . Or had God worked a miracle? . . . Over the heads of the people, Max's eyes, grave and tender, but unspeakably sad, looked into hers!

A hand seemed to grip her heart, squeezing it so that she could not draw her breath. Everything grew blurred and dim about her, but through the blur she could still see Max, standing with his head thrown back against the panelling of the door, his arms folded across his chest, and his eyes—those grave, questioning eyes—fixed on her face.

Presently the darkness cleared away and she found that she was still singing—mechanically her voice had answered to the long training of years. But the audience had heard the great *prima donna* catch her breath and falter in her song. For an instant it had seemed almost as though she might break down. Then the tension passed, and the lovely voice, upborne by a limitless technique, had floated out again, golden and perfect as before.

It was only the habit of surpassing art which had enabled Diana to finish her song. Since last night, when she had seen Max for that brief moment at the Embassy, she had passed through the whole gamut of emotion, glimpsed the vision of coming happiness, only to believe that with her own hands she had pushed it aside. And now she was conscious of nothing but that Max—Max, the man she loved—was here, close to her once again, and that her heart was crying out for him. He was hers, her mate out of the whole world, and in a sudden blinding flash of self-revelation, she recognised in her refusal to return to him a sheer denial of the divine altruism of love.

The blank, bewildering chaos of the last twelve hours, with its turmoil of conflicting passions, took on a new aspect, and all at once that which had been dark was become light.

From the moment she had learned the truth about her husband, her thoughts had centred solely round herself, dwelling—in all humility, it is true—but still dwelling none

the less egotistically upon her personal failure, her own irreparable mistake, her self-wrought bankruptcy of all the faith and absolute belief a woman loves to give her lover. She had thrust these things before his happiness, whereas the stern and simple creed of love places the loved one first and everything else immeasurably second.

But now, in this quickened moment of revelation, Diana knew that she loved Max utterly and entirely, that his happiness was her supreme need, and that if she let him go from her again, life would be henceforth a poor, maimed thing, shorn of all meaning.

It no longer mattered that she had sinned against him, that she had nothing to bring, that she must go to him a beggar. The scales had fallen from her eyes, and she realised that in love there is no reckoning—no pitiful making-up of accounts. The pride that cannot take has no place there; where love is, giving and taking are one and indivisible.

Nothing mattered any longer—nothing except that Max was here—here, within reach of the great love in her heart that was stretching out its arms to him . . . calling him back.

The audience, ardently applauding her first song, saw her turn and give some brief instruction to her accompanist, who nodded, laying aside the song which she had just placed upon the music-desk. A little whisper ran through the assembly as people asked each other what song was about to be substituted for the one on the programme, and when the sad, appealing music of "The Haven of Memory," stole out into the room, they smiled and nodded to one another, pleased that the great singer was giving them the song in which they loved best to hear her.

> Do you remember
> Our great love's pure unfolding,
> The troth you gave,
> And prayed for God's upholding,
> Long and long ago?

Out of the past
A dream—and then the waking—
Comes back to me
Of love, and love's forsaking,
Ere the summer waned.

Ah! Let me dream
That still a little kindness
Dwelt in the smile
That chid my foolish blindness,
When you said good-bye.

Let me remember
When I am very lonely,
How once your love
But crowned and blessed me only,
Long and long ago.

There was no faltering now. The beautiful voice had never been more touching in its exquisite appeal. All the unutterable sweetness and humility and faith, the wistful memories, the passion and surrender that love holds, dwelt in the throbbing notes.

To Max, standing a little apart, the width of the room betwixt him and the woman singing, it seemed as though she were entreating him . . . calling to him. . . .

The sad, tender words, poignant with regret and infinite beseeching, clamoured against his heart, and as the last note trembled into silence, he turned and made his way blindly out of the room.

CHAPTER XXIX

SACRIFICE

DID you mean it?"

Errington's voice broke harshly through the silence of the little anteroom where Diana waited alone. It had a curious, cracked sound, and his breath laboured like that of a man who has run himself out.

For a moment she kept her face hidden, trying to steady herself, but at last she turned towards him, and in her eyes was a soft shining—a strange, sweet fire.

"Max!" The whispered name was hardly audible; tremulous and wistful it seemed to creep across the room.

But he heard it. In a moment his arms were round her, and he had gathered her close against his heart. And so they remained for a space, neither speaking.

Presently Diana lifted her head.

"Max, it was because I loved you so that I was so hard and bitter—only because I loved you so."

"I know," was all he said. And he kissed her hair.

"Do you?"—wistfully. "I wonder if—if a man can understand how a woman can be so cruel to what she loves?"

And as he had no answer to this (since, after all, a man cannot be expected to understand all—or even very much—that a woman does), he kissed her lips.

She crept a little nearer to him.

"Max! Do you still care for me—like that?" There was wonder and thanksgiving in her voice. "Oh, my dear, I'm down in the dust at your feet—I've failed you utterly, wronged you every way. Even if you forgive me, I shall never forgive myself. But I'm—all yours, Max."

With a sudden jealous movement he folded her more closely in his arms.

"Let me have a few moments of this," he muttered, a little breathlessly. "A few moments of thinking you have come back to me."

"But I *have* come back to you!" Her eyes grew wide and startled with a sudden, desperate apprehension. "You won't send me away again—not now?"

His face twisted with pain.

"Beloved, I must! God knows how hard it will be—but there is no other way."

"No other way?" She broke from his arms, searching his face with her frightened eyes. "What do you mean? . . . *What do you mean?* Don't you—care—any longer?"

He smiled, as a man may who is asked whether the sun will rise to-morrow.

"Not that, beloved. Never that. I've always cared, and I shall go on caring through this world and into the next—even though, after to-night, we may never be together again."

"Never—together again?" She clung to him. "Oh, why do you say such things? I can't—I can't live without you now. Max, I'm sorry—*sorry!* I've been punished enough—don't punish me any more by sending me away from you."

"Punish you! Heart's dearest, there has never been any thought of punishment in my mind. Heaven knows, I've reproached myself bitterly enough for all the misery I've brought on you."

"Then why—why do you talk of sending me away?"

"I'm not going to send you away. It is I who have to go. Oh, beloved! I ought never to have come here this evening. But I thought if I might see you—just once again—before I went out into the night, I should at least have that to remember. . . . And then you sang, and it seemed as though you were calling me. . . ."

"Yes," she said very softly. "I called you. I wanted you so." Then, after a moment, with sudden, womanish curi-

osity: "How did you know I was singing here to-night?"

"Olga told me. She's bitterly opposed to all that I've been doing, but"—smiling faintly—"she has occasional spasms of compassion when she remembers that, after all, I'm a poor devil who's being thrust out of paradise."

"She loves you," Diana answered simply. "I think she has loved you—better—than I did, Max. But not more!" she added jealously. "No one could love you more, dear."

After a pause, she asked:

"I suppose Olga told you that I know—everything?"

"Yes. I'm glad you know"—quietly. "It makes it easier for me to tell you why I must go away—out of your life."

She leaned nearer to him, her hands on his shoulders.

"Don't go!" she whispered. "Ah, don't go!"

"I must," he said hoarsely. "Listen, beloved, and then you will see that there is no other way. . . . I married you, believing that when Nadine would be safely settled on the throne, I should be free to live my own life, free to come back to England—and you. If I had not believed that, I shouldn't have told you that I cared; I should have gone away and never seen you again. But now—now I know that I shall *never* be free, never able to live in England."

He paused, gathering her a little closer into his arms.

"Everything is settled. Russia has helped, and Ruvania is ready to welcome Nadine's return. . . . She is in Paris, now, waiting for me to take her there. . . . It has been a long and difficult matter, and the responsibility of Nadine's well-being in England has been immense. A year ago, the truth as to her identity leaked out somehow—reached our enemies' ears, and since then I've never really known an instant's peace concerning her safety. You remember the attack which was made on her outside the theatre?"

Diana nodded, shame-faced, remembering its ultimate outcome.

"Well, the man who shot at her was in the pay of the Republic—German pay, actually. That yarn about the

actor down on his luck was cooked up for the papers, just to throw dust in the eyes of the public. . . . To watch over Nadine's safety has been my work. Now the time has come when she can go back and take her place as Grand Duchess of Ruvania. *And I must go with her.*"

"No, no. Why need you go? You'll have done your work, set her securely on the throne. Ah, Max! don't speak of going, dear." Her voice shook incontrollably.

"There is other work still to be done, beloved—harder work, man's work. And I can't turn away and take my shoulder from the wheel. It needs no great foresight to tell that there is trouble brewing on the Continent; a very little thing would set the whole of Europe in a blaze. And when that time arrives, if Ruvania is to come out of the struggle with her independence unimpaired, it will only be by the utmost effort of all her sons. Nadine cannot stand alone. What can a woman do unaided when the nations are fighting for supremacy? The country will need a man at the helm, and I must stand by Nadine."

"But why you? Why not another?"

"No other is under the same compulsion as I. As you know, my father put his wife first and his country second. It is difficult to blame him . . . she was very beautiful, my mother. But no man has the right to turn away from his allotted task. And because my father did that, the call to me to serve my country is doubly strong. I have to pay back that of which he robbed her."

"And have I no claim? Max! Max! Doesn't your love count at all?"

The sad, grieving words wrung his heart.

"Why, yes," he said unsteadily. "That's the biggest thing in the world—our love—isn't it? But this other is a debt of honour, and you wouldn't want me to shirk that, would you, sweet? I must pay—even if it costs me my happiness. . . . It may seem to you as though I'd set your happiness, too, aside. God knows, it hasn't been easy! But what could I

do? I conceive that a man's honour stands before everything. That was why I let you believe—what you did. My word was given. I couldn't clear myself. . . . So you see, now, beloved, why we must part."

"No," she said quietly. "I don't see. Why can't I come to Ruvania with you?"

A sudden light leaped into his eyes, but it died away almost instantly. He shook his head.

"No, you can't come with me. Because—don't you see, dear?"—very gently and pitifully. "As my wife, as cousin of the Grand Duchess herself, you couldn't still be—a professional singer."

There was a long silence. Slowly Diana drew away from her husband, staring at him with dilated eyes.

"Then that—*that* was what Baroni meant when he told me a time would come when your wife could no longer sing in public?"

Max bent his head.

"Yes. That was what he meant."

Diana stood silently clasping and unclasping her hands. Presently she spoke again, and there was a new note in her voice—a note of quiet gravity and steadfast decision.

"Dear, I am coming with you. The singing"—smiling a little tremulously—"doesn't count—against love."

Max made a sudden movement as though to take her in his arms, then checked himself as suddenly.

"No," he said quietly. "You can't come with me. It would be impossible—out of the question. You haven't realised all it would entail. After being a famous singer—to become merely a private gentlewoman—a lady of a little unimportant Court! The very idea is absurd. Always you would miss the splendour of your life, the triumphs, the being fêted and made much of—everything that your singing has brought you. It would be inevitable. And I couldn't endure to see the regret growing in your eyes day by day. Oh, my dear, don't think I don't realise the generosity of the

thought—and bless you for it a thousand times! But I won't let you pay with the rest of your life for a heaven-kind impulse of the moment."

His words fell on Diana's consciousness, each one weighted with a world of significance. For she knew, even as she listened, that he spoke but the bare truth.

Very quietly she moved away from him and stood by the chimney-piece, staring down into the grate where the embers lay dying. It seemed to typify what her life would be, shorn of the glamour with which her glorious voice had decked it. It would be as though one had plucked out the glowing heart of a fire, leaving only ashes—dead ashes of remembrance.

And in exchange for the joyous freedom of Bohemia, the happy brotherhood of artistes, there would be the deadly daily ceremonial of a court, the petty jealousies and intrigues of a palace!

Very clearly Diana saw what the choice involved, and with that clear vision came the realisation that here was a sacrifice which she, who had so profaned love's temple, could yet make at the foot of the altar. And within her grew and deepened the certainty that no sacrifice in the world is too great to make for the sake of love, except the sacrifice of honour.

Here at last was something she could give to the man she loved. She need not go to him with empty hands. . . .

She turned again to her husband, and her eyes were radiant with the same soft shining that had lit them when he had first come to her in answer to her singing.

"Dear," she said, and her voice broke softly. "Take me with you. Oh, but you must think me very slow and stupid not to have learned—yet—what love means! . . . Ah, Max, Max! What am I to do, dear, if you won't let me go with you? What shall I do with all the love that is in my heart—if you won't take it?" For a moment she stood there tremulously smiling, while he stared at her, in his eyes a

kind of bewilderment and unbelief fighting the dawn of an unutterable joy.

Then at last he understood, and his arms went round her.

"If I won't take it!" he cried, his voice all shaken with the wonder of it. "Oh, my sweet! I'll take it as a beggar takes a gift, as a blind man sight—on my knees, thanking God for it—and for you."

And so Diana came again into her kingdom, whence she had wandered outcast so many bitter months.

Presently she drew him down beside her on to a big, cushioned divan.

"Max, what a lot of time we've wasted!"

"So much, sweet, that all the rest of life we'll be making-up for it." And he kissed her on the mouth by way of a beginning.

"What will Baroni say?" she whispered, with a covert smile.

"He'll wish he was young, as we are, so that he could love—as we do," he replied triumphantly.

Diana laughed at him for an arrogant lover, then sighed at a memory she knew of.

"I think he *has* loved—as we do," she chided gently.

Max's arm tightened round her.

"Then he's in need of envy, beloved, for love like ours is the most wonderful thing life has to give."

They were silent a moment, and then the quick instinct of lovers told them they were no longer alone.

Baroni stood on the threshold of the room, frowning heavily.

"So!" he exclaimed, grimly addressing Max. "This, then, is how you travel in haste to Paris?"

Startled, Diana sprang to her feet, and would have drawn herself away, but Max laughed joyously, and still keeping her hand in his, led her towards Baroni.

"*We* travel to Paris to-morrow," he said. "Won't you—wish us luck, Baroni?"

But luck was the last thing which the old *maestro* was by way of wishing them. For long he argued and expostulated upon the madness, as he termed it, of Diana's renouncing her career, trying his utmost to dissuade her.

"You haf not counted the cost!" he fumed at her. "You cannot haf counted the cost!"

But Diana only smiled at him.

"Yes, I have. And I'm glad it's going to cost me something—a good deal, in fact—to go back to Max. Don't you see, *Maestro,* it kind of squares things the tiniest bit?" She paused, adding, after a moment: "And it's such a little price to pay—for love."

Baroni, who, after all, knew a good deal about love as well as music, regarded her a moment in silence. Then, with a characteristic shrug of his massive shoulders, he yielded.

"So, then, the most marvellous voice of the century is to be wasted reading aloud to a Grand Duchess! Ah! Dearest of all my pupils, there is no folly in all the world at once so foolish and so splendid as the folly of love."

THE END

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